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Minnesota fans are feelin' the future thanks to a pair of outstanding rookies who've pushed themselves into the Calder conversation. Homegrown Brock Faber is proving to be a minute-munching machine, while Marco Rossi's return from a heart condition has been nothing short of remarkable. **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

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THE RACE IS NOW ON

COMING INTO THIS SEASON, it was pretty much unanimous that Chicago's Connor Bedard was going to be one of the major storylines as The Next Big Thing in hockey. The sensational teen was, in the minds of a lot of people, a lock for the Calder Trophy.

But that's the funny thing about the Calder: some of the greatest players of all-time didn't win it. Sidney Crosby lost out to Alex Ovechkin after both posted stunning 100-plus point rookie years. Wayne Gretzky didn't win it, but that's because he'd already played pro hockey in the WHA with Indianapolis and Edmonton before his NHL debut with the Oilers. And Connor McDavid fell short of top-rookie honors after an injury limited him to 45 games (in which he still put up an impressive 48 points).

Which brings us back to Bedard, who was slated to be sidelined until at least March with a fractured jaw he sustained Jan. 5. We don't know specifically how many games he'll miss, and we can't necessarily assume how quickly he'll get back up to speed once he returns. Having said that, Bedard was in control of the Calder race when he went down.

Whether or not Bedard ultimately wins rookie of the year, his absence did allow some other fantastic freshmen to step out of his shadow. Minnesota's Brock Faber (pg. 30) was the most obvious benefactor of this opportunity. Though regularly overlooked, Faber has been a worthy Calder candidate all season – you don't average more minutes than Victor Hedman without doing something right. Add in the fact the Wild scored more 5-on-5 goals than they surrendered with Faber on the ice and you can see the youngster was not merely being thrown to the wolves.

Offensively, Bedard has been hard to keep up with, but his injury did open a lane for others to close in on his gross output (he's still going to lead in points per game, in all likelihood). Faber's Wild teammate, Marco Rossi (pg. 35), was one such leading light, as were Calgary's Connor Zary (pg. 36) and Columbus' Dmitri Voronkov (pg. 40) and Adam Fantilli. Heck, even New Jersey defenseman Luke Hughes was starting to creep up the leaderboard.

Now, if Bedard returns without missing a beat and plays, let's say, around 50 to 55 games, then yes, the Calder will be his to earn. But going back to the history books again, let's not forget how many good rookies there have been in recent years, some of whom just had the bad luck of coming into the league at the same time as a phenom.

The 2016-17 race may be the best example. Auston Matthews won the Calder thanks to his splendid season with the Toronto Maple Leafs, but do you remember who else was eligible for the award that year? His future 'Core Four' buddies Mitch Marner and William Nylander. And while second-leading rookie scorer Patrik Laine has had a rollercoaster of a career since his initial takeoff, some of the other freshmen in that '16-17 class included Matthew Tkachuk, Sebastian Aho and Mikko Rantanen. Two years later, Vancouver's Elias Pettersson cruised to the Calder, but he wasn't the only star on the rise. Brady Tkachuk, Miro Heiskanen and Rasmus Dahlin were also part of that cohort.

So, yes, this is the Year of Bedard until it is not. And even with a pause for the jaw, it's been a delight. Bedard came exactly as advertised, and the fact Chicago could land another lottery pick opens up a world of fun possibilities for the franchise. But no one rookie comprises an entire class, and in this issue, we're celebrating a whole bunch of worthy names.

Ryan Kennedy
Editor in chief
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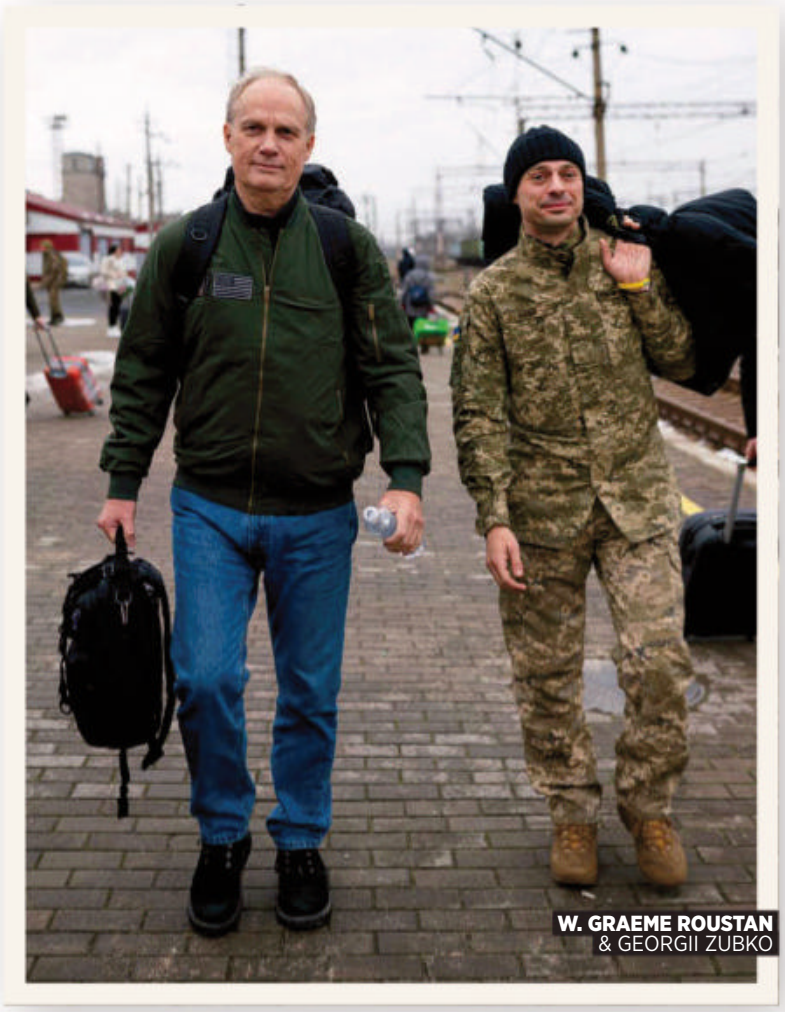

W. GRAEME ROUSTAN & GEORGII ZUBKO

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

6 Days In Ukraine Feedback

AS I CELEBRATE MY sixth anniversary, on Jan. 27, 2024, as the steward of The Hockey News, I took a look back over the holidays on the 93 issues that have been mailed out to our loyal subscribers under my watch as publisher.

My favorite cover of the 93 issues remains Vol. 74, No. 3, the 2021 Trade Deadline Preview with Walter Gretzky on the cover. I remember where I was when I heard the news that Gretzky had passed. It was on the car radio of my mom's bright red Toyota Yaris as I drove between Toronto and Carleton Place, Ont. It was such a sad moment that I had to pull over at the next ONroute service center near Kingston to make the call to The Hockey News team. Within minutes, we had scrapped much of what was already heading to the printer as we replaced both the cover and features with those of Walter Gretzky.

My favorite issue of these 93 issues that I now have under my belt is Vol. 77, No. 8, the 2024 Money and Power issue. That's the issue sent out just before this Rookie Issue, which most of you have received by now. Let me explain why.

PHOTO BY IGOR BABINETS

The Hockey News has been producing "themed" issues for several decades that are focused on what happens on the ice that our readers have embraced. Our Draft Preview and Future Watch issues are by far the most popular. With my experience on the business side of hockey, I thought our readers might also be interested in what happens on the business side of the game, and I was right.

For the past six years, I have taken the lead on the annual Money and Power issues. I have conducted more than 100 interviews, written more than a couple dozen opinion pieces and published almost 1,000 pages of business content. If you have read them all, then consider yourself to have earned your MBA in The Hockey News Business School.

Getting these massive annual business issues published is like running a marathon with 100-yard dashes at each of the 26-mile intervals. We start in September and only send the final pages off to the printer the day before Christmas, and it takes all the holidays to physically and mentally recover. This year was particularly difficult for me.

With all of the positive feedback that I received from the 2023 version, I decided to increase the size of the magazine by 36 pages, taking it up to 196 pages. Weighing in at 370 grams, it's now officially a 'bookazine.' It's so big that its 13 ounces is the absolute maximum weight allowed by the U.S. Postal Service to be sent as first-class mail. Another fraction of an ounce and it has to be sent as a package.

The 2024 Money and Power issue is bigger and better than ever, which is always at the core of what I try to do in business. I always want to grow a business and deliver a product to my customers that they will embrace as much as I do, which is why feedback is so helpful.

In my interview with Bill Hornbuckle, the CEO of MGM Resorts, we discussed how we both started out as bartenders and how important the skill of being a good listener is to that position as well as for being a business leader. Listening to your customers is everything, as he said, and we both always listen to feedback, good and bad.

"War on Hockey – 6 Days in Ukraine" was a story that I wrote for the 2024 Money and Power issue that followed me on my journey as I crisscrossed Ukraine. The 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles) over six days in trains and military vehicles were sandwiched between two Atlantic Ocean crossings and two other flights within Poland. Physically, it was a juggernaut of an expedition.

Emotionally, it was by far the most challenging. I find it near impossible to explain in words the feeling of going from life in Canada and the U.S. to that of life in Ukraine from one day to the next. The day I left Toronto, I had lunch at McDonald's and afternoon coffee at Tims. The sky was clear, the sun was shining, and there were no air raid sirens blaring. The next day in Lviv, I was in a different world, where people are literally fighting for their very lives every day.

Subscribers started receiving their copies of the 2024 Money and Power issue on Jan. 2, and since then, I have received the most feedback of any story that I have ever penned or on any of the 93 issues that I have published. All of the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Readers were thankful for my efforts to bring them an up-front-and-personal account of the devastation to Ukraine, its people and the bombed out hockey-related infrastructure. Many were surprised that I made the trip myself rather than sending a correspondent; however, I felt that I had to lead my team by example, which is the only way I know how to lead.

Owning The Hockey News is an honor and a privilege, as I have stated many times over the past six years. I believe that I have an obligation to all of the past journalists, publishers, subscribers and readers, just as I do for the future ones. Although a tad physically and mentally fatigued after publishing the 2024 Money and Power issue, I have rested up and am already planning for the 2025 Money and Power issue. Thank you for your "6 Days in Ukraine" feedback.

W. Graeme Roustan

W. Graeme Roustan
Executive Chairman & Publisher,
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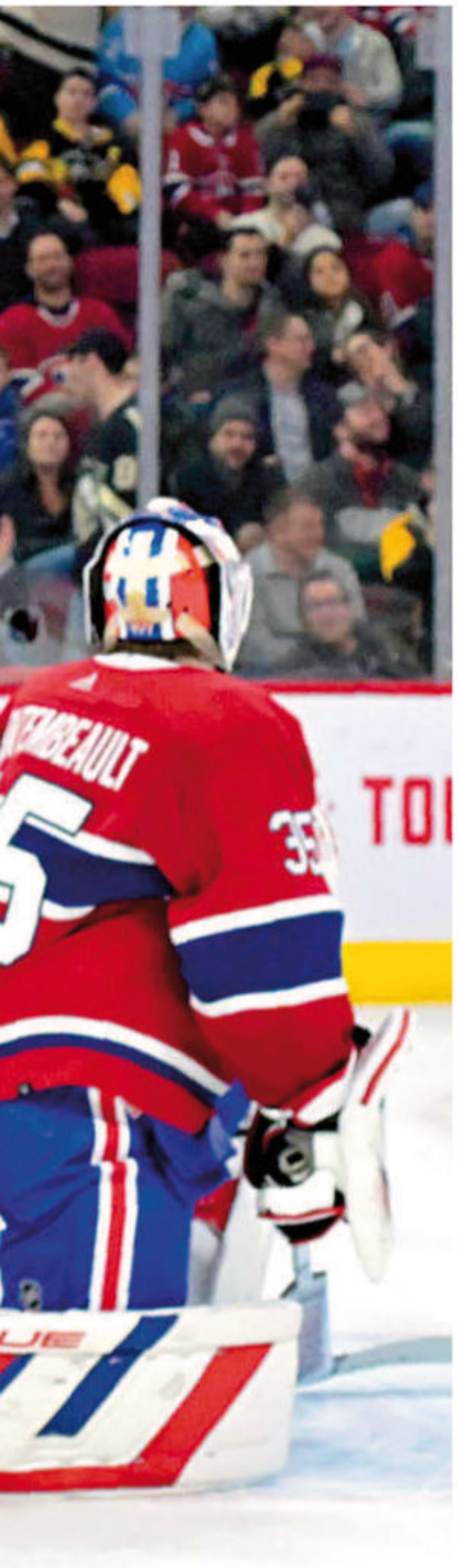

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SIDNEY CROSBY

NHL

LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE OLD GUARD

In an issue where we celebrate the next generation of NHL stars, let's tip our caps to the greybeard greats who are still getting it done in a big way **BY JARED CLINTON**

THE WAY THINGS ARE going, the days of the worn-and-weathered NHL veteran are starting to look numbered.

Though it has never been easy for those in the league's greybeard community to keep up with those darn kids, there was a time early in the post-lockout era where salary-cap considerations actually worked in the old guard's favor. In the first four seasons following the lost 2004-05 campaign, the NHL averaged nearly 68 players who were 35 or older by February, including an all-time high of 72 such veterans during 2007-08. In fact, the six seasons with the most 35-plus players in league history occurred immediately after the lockout. But times are getting tougher for the league's senior cohort.

In 2023-24, those in the 35-plus category totalled just 39, and the past four years have seen the average number of such players dip to 40 per season. That this comes following back-to-back seasons in which the number dipped below 30 – 28 in 2018-19 and 29 in 2019-20 – might suggest a modest revival of the veteran class. The other side of the argument, however, is that the cadre of first-ballot Hall of Fame-level talent entering the twilights of their careers is simply skewing the average.

Regardless of whether it's an anomaly or a harbinger of what's to come for the soon-to-be NHL pensioners, there's joy to be had from watching some modern-day greats defy the aging curve. So, while the kids are all right, these six 35-or-older players on our Old Guy All-Star Team are proving they've rarely ever been better.

CENTER > SIDNEY CROSBY
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

Yes, Crosby is old enough to appear on this list. No, we don't like to be reminded of that. As a courtesy, we'll give you a moment to compose yourself as you're reminded of the cruel passage of time.

JOE PAVELSKI

With that out of the way, it's remarkable what Crosby has accomplished through the opening months of the campaign. At 36, he was lighting the lamp at the third-highest per-game rate of his career and found himself on pace to notch nearly 50 goals and 90 points. To put that into perspective, only eight players in NHL history have scored 90 or more points in their 36-year-old season. Only one other player – Alex Ovechkin, the yin to Crosby's yang – has managed to accomplish both statistical milestones at such an age.

It's not the offense alone, though. Crosby remains a play-driving pivot despite continuing to draw top matchups as the go-to guy. It's with that in mind we're reminded again why we should cherish every minute left in Crosby's career. With only one additional year remaining on his current deal, we can't be sure how much longer the former 'Kid' will be around. What we are sure of, however, is that it continues to be a gift to watch him play.

RIGHT WING > JOE PAVELSKI
DALLAS STARS

Not only are professional athletes not supposed to age like Pavelski, they're not supposed to be able to completely defy the very concept of statistical decline. And yet, as he inches ever closer to his 40th birthday – he'll celebrate the big day in July 2024 – the 39-year-old finds himself enjoying the sixth-best goal-scoring rate of his career and a near point-per-game performance. Should his pace continue, Pavelski will join Gordie Howe, Johnny Bucyk and Teemu Selanne as the only players of such a vintage to score 80 points in a season.

Most impressive about Pavelski is that he continues to produce despite lacking a signature attribute. He has never

had Ovechkin's shot, Crosby's puck dominance or Connor McDavid's speed. Instead, Pavelski has relied on persistence, intelligence and a dedication to his craft. That commitment to the sport is the most invaluable, especially as he imparts it on his younger Stars teammates.

When he signed a three-year deal in Dallas in 2019, it seemed likely to be his last opportunity to chase the Stanley Cup victory that has eluded him throughout his career. Subsequent one-year deals in 2022 and 2023 have extended that pursuit. But with the way Pavelski is playing – and barring a Stars' Cup victory in June – it'd surprise no one to see him continue into his 40s.

LEFT WING > BRAD MARCHAND
BOSTON BRUINS

Perhaps it's a generalization that players reach their statistical pinnacles by the time they're in their late 20s. It could even hold more truth in the modern era, too, when top young talents are becoming legitimate stars not long after they break into the NHL. But if there's an exception that proves the rule, it's inarguably Marchand, who has delivered not one but *all* of his most productive seasons after his 28th birthday.

That is continuing this season, too. Despite a consensus belief that the departure of Patrice Bergeron would signal the beginning of a downturn in Boston, the 35-year-old Marchand continues to help guide the offense and play the same game that has made him simultaneously one of the most beloved Bruins of all-time and a 5-foot-9 thorn in the side of the league's 31 other franchises.

Marchand's value goes well beyond his contributions on the scoresheet. He remains one of the league's most dangerous and dynamic penalty-killers – he's one shorthanded goal from entering the top 10 all-time – and he brings the intangibles worthy of wearing his newfound 'C.' He also sets the cultural tone in Boston. That's no small task, either.

CAM TALBOT

DEFENSE > BRENT BURNS
CAROLINA HURRICANES

It's true that Burns doesn't possess the same dynamism he did at his zenith, but the three-quarters-speed version of the bearded wonder still happens to be one of the NHL's most effective point-producing defensemen. And Carolina has been a match made in heaven for the 38-year-old.

When the Hurricanes acquired Burns in July 2022, the reasoning was sound. Carolina's blueline was loaded with two-way rearguards who were effective, though not always outstanding, at generating offense. That made Burns' creative profile an obvious fit, and the results were instant: his 61-point output in 2022-23 was his best since he had 83 points in 2018-19. And though his numbers slipped significantly through the early part of this season – he was posting his lowest per-game production in nearly 15 years – it's simply a matter of Burns' effectiveness not always showing up on the scoresheet.

That's most evident in his 5-on-5 performance, where Burns and partner Jaccob Slavin have so often tilted the ice in the Hurricanes' favor. Only four pairings with at least 350 minutes together at five-a-side have a greater expected goals share than Burns and Slavin, with the former ranking 17th as an individual among the same 350-minute cohort.

DEFENSE > KRIS LETANG
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

There are two ways to read Letang's average ice time this season. The more uncharitable of the two is less an admiration of his ability than an indictment of the shape of the Penguins' blueline. That the 36-year-old is still skating nearly 25 minutes per game – more than young, perennial Norris Trophy contenders such as Cale Makar, Quinn Hughes and Charlie McAvoy – and doing so while 33-year-old Erik Karlsson consumes nearly 25 minutes of his own – is an indication of just how bleak things could become when the current Crosby-led era comes to a close.

Yet Letang's results go a long way toward justifying his usage. Though his offense has declined, it's a reflection of his role. The longtime power-play quarterback has been relegated to second-unit duty behind Karlsson, but Letang is making up for those lost minutes with increased 5-on-5 and penalty-kill duty – his 2:43 shorthanded average is nearly in line with his career high. Most importantly, Letang has been sound in his role. Among the top 50 blueliners in five-a-side ice time, Letang ranked 15th in expected-goal percentage. He's also on pace to crack the 50-point plateau for the seventh time in his career, and his record-setting five-point period on Dec. 27 was a sign that his playmaking ability persists.

GOALTENDER > CAM TALBOT
LOS ANGELES KINGS

There's an argument to be made – and a good one at that – for Jonathan Quick, who turned 38 in late January, to slide into the goaltending spot for the all-greybeard group. In his first 11 starts, the New York Rangers netminder lost just once in regulation and was statistically outperforming creasemate and 2022 Vezina Trophy winner Igor Shesterkin. Moreover, Quick ranked seventh in goals saved above average per 60 minutes among stoppers who'd appeared in at least 10 games.

The thing is, though, Talbot ranked fourth and had a save percentage four points higher while facing a similar amount of rubber across an additional 10 contests. Debate among yourselves whether it's possible for a 36-year-old to have a career resurgence, but it's almost unfathomable Talbot is turning in this type of season after the unmitigated disaster that was his 2022-23 campaign in Ottawa. Brought in to be the No. 1 for the Senators, Talbot spent more time fighting the puck than stopping it last season. His end-of-year .898 SP and 2.93 goals-against average left some asking whether he'd passed his sell-by date as a starter. But playing behind a far more defensively sound Kings outfit, Talbot has proven he can still shoulder the load as a starter. Add to it that Talbot has performed this well while earning a relative pittance – he carries a mere $1-million cap hit – and L.A.'s off-season flier has turned into one of the summer's best signings.

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PWHL

‘WOMEN’S HOCKEY WORKS’

There’s no question the PWHL has a few things to figure out – like team names and logos and merchandising and venues – but the early runaway success of the new unified women’s league cannot be denied **BY IAN KENNEDY**

GOOD THINGS COME TO those who wait. For professional women’s hockey players, it appears the wait, one that spanned decades and multiple leagues, is over after the launch of the Professional Women’s Hockey League.

The circuit set ambitious goals with exactly six months from announcement to puck drop, a span that included choosing markets, securing arenas, scheduling, holding a draft, building rosters, hiring staff, making rules, securing broadcasting, finding sponsors and developing merchandise and branding. With the inaugural season underway, some of these items remain in the works. As PWHL New York GM Pascal Daoust said, at times, the process has been “like building a plane while flying.” Despite the challenges, the on-ice product speaks for itself.

“We got the hockey right,” said PWHL board member Stan Kasten. “Women’s hockey works. It works as entertainment. Whether you’re in the building. Whether you’re in your home. Whether you’re in the bar. It works, and it works as a business. It works for selling tickets. It works for selling advertising. It works for selling sponsorships.”

Ticket sales were another aspect of the PWHL’s strong start. Toronto – which plays at Mattamy Athletic Centre, a 2,600-seat arena located in the former Maple Leaf Gardens – sold out all 12 home games within hours. The day after the league’s first game, in Toronto on Jan. 1, Ottawa set a new pro women’s hockey attendance record with 8,318 fans at TD Place. Days later, Minnesota’s home-opener at Xcel Energy Center smashed that mark with an attendance of 13,316. “As the games got closer, we were surprised it was picking up steam as quickly as it did,” Kasten said. “We projected very conservatively. We’re a start-up. No one knew about it. We rushed to market. All of those things. So, we projected very conservatively. I can say we have exceeded projections.”

Kasten, who attended many early PWHL games in person but also watched others from his home in Los Angeles, points to the “major league” broadcasts as another success. The PWHL is being shown on several regional and national networks including NESN, MSG, Bally, TSN, Sportsnet and CBC, while also broadcasting all of its games for free on YouTube.

In Canada, 2.9 million viewers tuned into Toronto’s opener, which was simulcast across three networks, and hundreds of thousands more streamed games online, which Kasten called “an amazing first indication” of interest in the league. “There’s no question, we have entered people’s consciousness,” Kasten said. “We believe, and we have for years, this is a great time for women’s sports.”

Key to this interest was the on-ice product. The expected speed and skill of the PWHL – from Ella Shelton’s first goal in league history to stunning performances from Marie-Philip Poulin, Taylor Heise and Alex Carpenter – was coupled with the evolution of a more physical component to the game. “There’s a lot of physi-

SAMMY KOGAN/THE HOCKEY NEWS

KING+HEFFORD: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; MINNESOTA: PHOTO BY PWHL

cality," said PWHL senior vice-president of hockey operations and Hockey Hall of Fame inductee Jayna Hefford. "That was our priority, to let the game be physical, the way women want to play the game."

The league is also blazing trails in terms of rules. The PWHL adapted a 3-2-1 point system – with regulation wins earning three points, overtime or shootout wins worth two points and overtime or shootout losses getting one point. Similarly, the league drew interest for its "jailbreak" rule, whereby if a penalized team scores a shorthanded goal, it negates the power play and returns the penalized player to the ice.

While there are lots of positives, there remains significant work to be done. From merchandise, to venues, logos and team names, trophies and travel, the league is still working out issues. According to Kasten, the PWHL was not surprised by the challenges; they knew those would occur. "We have a lot of work ahead of us to put all the pieces together," Kasten said. "We came into this prepared. There have been no negative surprises to us. Sure, we're going to make mistakes. Sure, we have things to work on, and we'll get them right for Year 2."

While the PWHL was ready for challenges, many fans were not. Criticism often surrounded the lack of distinct or even available merchandise and the absence of team names and logos. Having worked with league owner Mark Walter, who's also a co-owner of the Premier League's Chelsea FC, Kasten says that while names and logos are important and being completed as quickly as possible, they don't define fandom. "We have an active program going on to finalize names and logos, and the story behind the names and logos," he said. "The most popular league in the world, the Premier League, doesn't have nicknames. They just use cities."

Kasten's theory proved correct early, as chants of "Let's go New York" and "Let's go T.O." filled arenas.

GAME ON

With the launch of the PWHL, a new day has dawned for women's professional hockey.

Aside from branding, one of the main logistical aspects the PWHL is tracking is how its venues meet the needs of its fan bases. Considering the PWHL pre-season was underway before the league had officially finalized each venue for the regular season, it's a process that Kasten says won't come into full view until the 2024 season is complete, including evaluating if some markets need bigger or smaller venues. "Obviously, we're in the constant process of evaluating cities and evaluating venues," he said. "We did the very best we could. We're happy with all six of our cities. I'm happy with all six of our venues, but that was the best we could do in August and even into September. Is that the best we can do long-term? I don't know. It's a new season. I'll know at the end of the season."

Through the trials and tribulations, there have been celebrations and triumphs, and it's only the start. Kasten and the PWHL aren't done, and they see the work ahead, but they now also know the success that women's hockey can achieve. "I'm not declaring victory," Kasten said. "We have a long way to go. We have a lot of things we need to fix and improve, but women's hockey works. I can say that definitively now, period."

Behind the MASK

MARC-ANDRE FLEURY | MINNESOTA WILD

IN A TIME OF chrome finishes and sensory-overloading design, the mask that Marc-Andre Fleury commissioned for the Minnesota Wild's Native American Heritage Night again proves simplicity is beautiful. Designed by Mdewakanton Dakota artist Cole Redhorse Taylor, the decoration of Dakota florals – unintentionally tying into Fleury's 'Flower' nickname – was hand-painted by Shell Shock Designs' Noah Ennis, while the original Dakotan name of the Minnesota territory, Mni Sota Makoce, is featured behind the cage. Due to the NHL's ill-conceived restrictions on equipment supporting social causes, Fleury was told he risked fines if he wore the mask during the Wild's Nov. 24 game. While Fleury didn't end up playing that night, he did don the helmet for warmups. Fleury's stance and its design resonated: the mask, auctioned after the game in support of the Minnesota Wild Foundation, sold for $35,100. **– JARED CLINTON**

Jersey HOUND

OWEN SOUND ATTACK | 2023-24

ANY TIME YOUR TEAM can throw back to 100 years ago, you gotta do it. The OHL's Owen Sound Attack seized that opportunity this season, creating a jersey that honors the 1923-24 Owen Sound Greys, who won the Memorial Cup that season. The execution here is excellent, especially since photos from that era are mostly black and white. But the colors work well, and the primary crest definitely has a great old-school vibe. On top of that, the shoulder patch features the player names from the '23-24 Greys roster – a nice touch, to be sure. The Attack will wear these beauties nine times in the second half of the 2023-24 campaign. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

JERSEY: PHOTO BY OWEN SOUND ATTACK; MASK: PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PRAIRIE ISLAND INDIAN COMMUNITY

HIRED GUN-O-METER

Despite living in an age of own-rentals and rent-to-own deals, where big-name acquisitions are signed soon after arriving, there's still room for one-and-done types. But in the true rental category – players who plied their trade for one post-season before departing in free agency – who has been the best? **BY JARED CLINTON**

'HOSS' THE BOSS

> MARIAN HOSSA
PITTSBURGH (2007-08)
12-14-26, 21:00 TOI
The king of rentals. Hossa was another weapon in the Pens' arsenal, posting 10 multi-point outings in the playoffs and helping Pittsburgh to the final. After the loss to Detroit, Hossa signed with the Wings – who lost the '09 final to Pittsburgh.

RECHS MARKS THE SPOT

> MARK RECCHI
CAROLINA (2005-06)
7-9-16, 16:34 TOI
A 38-year-old Recchi, acquired from Pittsburgh, was considered a depth add but then racked up the sixth-most points of any Cane en route to Carolina's first Cup. He came up big, too, with two winners, including Game 4 of the final.

FIRST TIME'S THE CHARM

> RON HAINSEY
PITTSBURGH (2016-17)
2-6-8, 21:07 TOI
Hainsey played 907 games before getting his first taste of playoff action. So, how did he fare in his first go-round? Forced into top-pairing duty, Hainsey was second in ice time and chipped in offensively as the Penguins won the second of back-to-back Cups.

FUELLING THE JETS

> PAUL STASTNY
WINNIPEG (2017-18)
6-9-15, 17:24 TOI
The only non-Cup finalist listed, Stastny was superb for the Jets, particularly against Nashville, with two game-winners and 10 points in a seven-game victory. The Jets' Cup run, though, was halted by Vegas.

THE VERMINATOR

> ANTOINE VERMETTE
CHICAGO (2014-15)
4-3-7, 13:08 TOI
The overall output isn't impressive, but it's when Vermette made his presence felt that elevates him. Three of his four goals were game-winners, including in a pair of 2-1 victories in the Cup final. He didn't play a lot, but he made his minutes count.

HEAVY-WEIGHT CHAMP

> DOUG WEIGHT
CAROLINA (2005-06)
3-13-16, 15:27 TOI
Weight's veteran guile was what the Canes sought, and he delivered when it mattered, including two points in Game 7 of the East final. Unfortunately for Weight, he was forced to sit out the Cup-clinching win with a shoulder injury.

HOSSA: JASON BRIDGE-USA TODAY; RECCHI: JAMES GUILLORY-USA TODAY SPORTS; HAINSEY: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; STASTNY: JAMES CAREY LAUDER-USA TODAY SPORTS; VERMETTE: DENNIS WIERZBICKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; WEIGHT: LOU CAPOZZOLA-USA TODAY NETWORK

In the CARDS

BRUINS FANS WHO COLLECT hockey cards should take note of the new Boston Bruins Centennial box set, released by Upper Deck in late 2023. The set consists of 100 of the most popular players in the B's century-long history. The legends you'd expect to find – Bobby Orr, Ray Bourque, Phil Esposito, Gerry Cheevers, Eddie Shore, Cam Neely, Patrice Bergeron, Zdeno Chara and many others – are present, but the set also pays homage to fan favorites who made their marks in Boston, such as Mike Milbury and Terry O'Reilly, as well as stars like Jacques Plante and Rick Nash, who spent only a short time in Beantown. In addition to the full 100-card set, each Bruins Centennial box set includes four parallel cards and one "Beantown Classics" insert card. One in every 10 sets randomly includes an autographed card. **– SAL BARRY**

THE COUNTDOWN

NHL ROSTER AGES

The Sabres, Jackets and Canadiens check in as the NHL's most youthful teams, while the Isles, Wild and Penguins could use a few more kids in the lineup **BY JARED CLINTON**

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, or at least anecdotal evidence and a general misconception about the way NHL teams have been assembled since the adoption of the salary cap in 2005, has led hockey fans to believe that we're in the most bright-eyed and bushy-tailed era in NHL history. But that isn't quite true.

In fact, in order to find the youngest roster in NHL history, you need to skip back more than two decades to the 1987-88 Quebec Nordiques. All but seven of those Nordiques, who finished last in the Wales Conference, were in their age-25 season or younger, with 31-year-old Peter Stastny playing the role of elder statesman. And those '87-88 Nordiques aren't much of an outlier when it comes to the league's most youthful era, either. According to eliteprospects.com, there have been 57 rosters with a lower average age than the most babyfaced among this season's teams, and 45 of those outfits played during the '80s.

Perhaps more surprising, though, is that the chasm between the youngest and oldest rosters seems to be growing. Less than two-and-a-half years separated the Nordiques from the aged Hartford Whalers in '87-88. In 2023-24, the gap between the youngest and oldest rosters is nearly twice as great. (All average ages per Elite Prospects as of the NHL's roster freeze on Dec. 19.)

1 BUFFALO SABRES

25.4 YEARS

The young, talented nucleus is full of promise even if the Sabres haven't lived up to pre-season expectations.

2 COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

25.5 YEARS

Blue Jackets are betting on recent drafts righting the ship. Pressure is on Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson and David Jiricek.

3 MONTREAL CANADIENS

25.9 YEARS

Cole Caufield and Nick Suzuki are stars, but blueliners Justin Barron and Kaiden Guhle are key to Montreal's future.

ADAM FANTILLI

4 OTTAWA SENATORS

26.2 YEARS

The 25-and-under core, led by Tim Stutzle and Brady Tkachuk, is enviable. Despite results, Ottawa's not far away.

5 CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

26.2 YEARS

Connor Bedard met expectations, but Kevin Korchinski is a revelation. Baby Hawks have lots of room to grow.

6 ARIZONA COYOTES

26.2 YEARS

An unheralded and rag-tag group, the Coyotes gave their youth the chance to sink or swim. It's paying dividends.

7 NEW JERSEY DEVILS

26.4 YEARS

More than one-quarter of the Devils' roster was born in the 2000s. They can be a force in the East for years to come.

8 ANAHEIM DUCKS

26.6 YEARS

Many new Ducks are on the way thanks to excellent drafting. Leo Carlsson and Pavel Mintyukov lead this year's class.

9 PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

27.2 YEARS

John Tortorella's pairing of veterans with youth had Philly humming. Tyson Foerster is among those benefitting most.

10 WINNIPEG JETS

27.2 YEARS

The first Jets 2.0 wave – Mark Scheifele, Nikolaj Ehlers, Josh Morrissey – is in or near their 30s. Time for the next one.

11 LOS ANGELES KINGS

27.5 YEARS

The retooling worked, but Kings' contention relies on getting the most out of vets Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty.

12 SAN JOSE SHARKS

27.6 YEARS

William Eklund's growth is a treat amid lost season. Expect Sharks to get younger as full-scale rebuild continues.

JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

13 BOSTON BRUINS
27.6 YEARS
Fear of turnover was exaggerated, especially with scouts unearthing gems like camp surprise Matthew Poitras.

14 ST. LOUIS BLUES
27.7 YEARS
Aging D-corps, nearly all 30-plus, offsets young attack led by 25-and-unders like Robert Thomas and Jordan Kyrou.

15 VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS
27.7 YEARS
The Knights' targeting of contention-ready talent means the team keeps getting older. Few up-and-comers in Vegas.

16 VANCOUVER CANUCKS
27.8 YEARS
Led by players in their prime (Elias Pettersson, Quinn Hughes), Vancouver is a contender under coach Rick Tocchet.

17 FLORIDA PANTHERS
27.9 YEARS
Cats' commitments are few after this season, and summer turnover could lead to retool. But the prospect pool is thin.

18 CALGARY FLAMES
27.9 YEARS
Time to reset? Big swings flopped, and the system is lean. A youth movement could get Flames back on track.

19 TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS
27.9 YEARS
The Leafs plan on seeing it through with this core. Spending could necessitate rookies plugging future holes.

20 NASHVILLE PREDATORS
28.1 YEARS
Veteran signings were confounding, but Preds got older to stay competitive. There is promising talent in the pipeline.

21 COLORADO AVALANCHE
28.1 YEARS
Average age of the core is gently ticking up. The Avs risk a steady downturn by failing to bring in new blood.

22 NEW YORK RANGERS
28.2 YEARS
Summer signings Jonathan Quick, Blake Wheeler and Nick Bonino have average age of 36.3. That's veteran presence.

23 TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING
28.2 YEARS
Luke Glendening is oldest at 34, and no skater is under 25. Still, the Bolts are younger than last season.

24 CAROLINA HURRICANES
28.3 YEARS
Plenty of prime-aged talent puts the Canes in win-now mode, especially as key cogs begin to enter into UFA status.

25 EDMONTON OILERS
28.4 YEARS
Clock is ticking on the Oilers to deliver playoff success as Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl inch closer to 30.

26 WASHINGTON CAPITALS
28.6 YEARS
Hendrix Lapierre was three-and-a-half when Alex Ovechkin debuted in the NHL. Nearly 6,000 days separate their ages.

27 DETROIT RED WINGS
28.6 YEARS
After finishing last season with the sixth-youngest club, the Wings sought out vets in pursuit of a playoff berth.

28 DALLAS STARS
28.7 YEARS
At 39, Joe Pavelski defies age and gives guidance to the next generation, like Jason Robertson and Wyatt Johnston.

29 SEATTLE KRAKEN
28.8 YEARS
Greying roster is a byproduct of expansion, but Seattle continues shepherding along future Kraken like Matty Beniers.

30 NEW YORK ISLANDERS
28.9 YEARS
The Isles need some fresh-faced offensive talent. Mat Barzal turns 27 in May, and he's the youngest top-six regular.

31 MINNESOTA WILD
29.0 YEARS
Veteran-laden roster hasn't delivered. Hand the reins to Kirill Kaprizov, Matt Boldy, Marco Rossi and Brock Faber.

32 PITTSBURGH PENGUINS
29.8 YEARS
Pens' youngest top-six forward is 29-year-old Jake Guentzel. The post-Crosby era in Pittsburgh could get ugly.

THOMAS: BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOLDY: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

THE OUAZZANI FAMILY & ALEX ARSENAULT

NEW FANS HAVE A PAL IN AL

Moncton fan is determined to share his love of the junior game with new Canadians

BY WILL MACLAREN

THE MONCTON WILDCATS are emerging as a veteran-laden contender in the QMJHL. But the biggest success story in southeast New Brunswick might be an inspired group of rookies, cheering them on from the stands.

On this particular night in late November, that crop of rookies at the Avenir Centre includes Vinicius Bicalho, better known as Vinny. Originally from Brazil, Vinny moved with his wife and three children to Moncton in 2022, seeking a better life. On this night, they are witnessing a hockey game for the first time. "It's a totally different experience," Bicalho said. "It's such a fast game. I've really been impressed."

Equally impressive is the man who put the wheels in motion to bring Vinny and his family to the building that night. Not to mention many other families on many other nights this season.

Alex Arsenault is an all-around sports fanatic and lifelong resident of the Moncton area. He is a longtime season-ticket holder and has been attending Wildcats games since his mother, Denise, began taking him as a small boy. His passion for junior hockey runs deep. "I've made lifelong friends through going to these games," said the 33-year-old with a smile that confirms the memories. "I met my future wife at a game in Bathurst 16 years ago. It's (a level of the game) I really wanted to share with others."

The Wildcats have been a fixture in the city for almost three decades and are the primary sports franchise in the area. To many, there's not much new to share when it comes to the old hometown team. But with the demographic of the region changing, a unique opportunity came into focus. "Over the last few years, so many new Canadians are moving into our area," Arsenault said. "They're trying to put down roots and want to become members of our communities. I've met a lot of people recently who have made a lot of sacrifices to move to this area in the hope of achieving a better way of life."

It was at the intersection of inspiring personal stories and great hockey that Al's Pals was born. The premise was simple. Arsenault purchased four sets of Wildcats season tickets out of his own pocket and at no discount. To obtain them, only three criteria need to be met: the applicants must never have attended a hockey game before, they had to submit a picture of themselves enjoying the game they took in, and they had to send Arsenault a short blurb about their experience.

INTRO TO HOCKEY
Al's Pals has allowed scores of new Canadians, including the Bicalho family, to see their first hockey game.

So how many pals has Al made so far? Arsenault posted on the Al's Pals Facebook page for the first time on Aug. 28, outlining the program's intent and issuing a call for potential new fans. Two days later, tickets for half of the Wildcats' 34 regular-season home games were spoken for. By early December, the initiative sent over 200 people to their first hockey game.

One of the most impressive aspects is the fact that Arsenault is, essentially, a one-man operation. With the exception of a few donations from local businesses, including one large donation in late November that sent more than 100 fans to a game, Arsenault, who also coaches para hockey, has been relying almost exclusively on word of mouth and a modest social-media following. "It's definitely a labor of love," he said with a laugh. "I would always appreciate more support, but, at the end of the day, I'm only one guy. If it's up to me to keep arranging everything myself, I'm about at my capacity now."

He's going to be at capacity for a while. The waiting list continues to roll along into the hundreds. Returnees are not only a certainty, they're already expressing interest. Which brings us back to newly minted fan Vinny Bicalho. Asked if his family would return for a future game, his daughter, perched upon her dad's tiring arm, revealed a grin. "For sure," Bicalho said. "We are so interested in Canadian culture. We want to be part of it. The children are having a great time."

Arsenault's list of pals may be several arms long. But the memories being forged in Moncton and the potential next wave of hockey fans being created are infinitely further reaching.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALEX ARSENAULT

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Puck CULTURE

FIVE TIMES THE NHLPA SNUBBED THE NHL

The players' union and the league haven't always seen eye to eye when it comes to merchandise. Here are five examples of NHLPA-endorsed products that the NHL didn't buy into **BY SAL BARRY**

THE NHL AND NHL Players' Association have been at odds at times when it comes to licensing merchandise. Much of this turmoil occurred in the 1990s amid labor disputes. Here are five interesting products that the NHLPA licensed without NHL approval.

1 > *NHLPA HOCKEY '93* VIDEO GAME

The *NHL Hockey* video game, released by Electronic Arts in 1991, was licensed by the NHL but not the NHLPA – though not for lack of trying. "I went to Time Warner, who handled licensing for both the league and the players," said Michael Brook, the game's producer. "They said they could only give us the NHL license." *NHL Hockey* was popular enough to get a sequel, so Brook decided to try the players again. "I went directly to the Players' Association, and they said they heard nothing about this," he said. "They were happy to license us." However, the NHL was unhappy that *NHL Hockey* had fighting in it, so they pulled its licensing. Thus, the sequel was called *NHLPA Hockey '93*, and while it used the names and attributes of NHL players, it did not use any team names or logos. The game did have fighting, and you could "make Wayne Gretzky's head bleed," as Vince Vaughn famously said in the movie *Swingers*. The next year, the sides worked out their differences for the release of the game's third installment, *NHL '94*. The game did not have fighting, but it finally had NHL logos, team names and player names.

2 > COLLECTIBLE MINI-STICKS

Irwin Toy released the "Don Cherry Mini-Stick Hockey" game in 1994, which included two 18-inch sticks, two pucks measuring two inches in diameter and a small net for "knee hockey" action. Irwin repurposed these sticks and pucks three years later for a series of "NHLPA Collectible Mini-Sticks" featuring names and photos of popular players. Obviously, team names and logos were omitted, while a sticker picturing an NHL player in a generic NHLPA jersey was affixed to the blade. All sticks had the photo affixed to the left forehand side, meaning that if you shot lefty, the player's picture would wear out. Unfortunately, Irwin Toy did not bother to make any "righty" or goalie sticks. The back of the packaging urges kids to "Collect them all!" – but at $5 each, collecting the 36 different player sticks added up quickly.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAL BARRY

3 > SCHOOL SUPPLIES

What better way to show your classmates that you like NHL players – but not necessarily the NHL itself – than with your own licensed NHLPA school supplies? Montreal-based company Calego made merchandise such as school kits, notebooks, binders, wallets and backpacks featuring popular characters such as Batman and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles during the 1980s. By the early 1990s, Calego chairman Steven Rapps wanted to give hockey a try. "I tried to make a deal with the NHLPA and the NHL," Rapps said. The Players' Association was eager to work with Calego. The NHL? Not so much. "The NHL licensing person was a part of the old-boys club, and he did not want to bring us on board even though we were the undisputed leaders in licensed back-to-school products," Rapps said. Despite his best efforts, Rapps couldn't strike a deal with the NHL, so Calego inked a contract with just the NHLPA and made back-to-school products that pictured popular players from the 1990s – but removed all team logos.

4 > HEADLINERS FIGURES

In 1996, toy company Corinthian released a series of three-inch-tall mini-bobblehead figures called Headliners, which featured the top athletes from the NFL, NBA, MLB and...NHLPA? That's right. The NHL was the only "big four" North American pro sports league to not license Headliners when it launched during the 1996-97 season. So, figures of Patrick Roy, Wayne Gretzky, Mats Sundin and other popular players were clad in generic uniforms bearing the NHLPA logo. Regardless, the likenesses of Headliners figures were good, and the back of the packaging stated, "You'll know them when you see them!" The NHL must have also known a good thing when they saw it, because the league relented and licensed Headliners figures for the 1997-98 and '98-99 seasons.

5 > BE A PLAYER TRADING CARDS

Hockey cards skyrocketed in popularity in the early 1990s and became a significant source of revenue for NHL players. But by 1993-94, the NHL tried to limit how many sets of cards could be made. "Initially, that hockey-card revenue was the pipeline to sustain the Players' Association," said former NHL goaltender Andy Moog, who was on the NHLPA's licensing committee at the time. "Card companies were coming hard at the Players' Association, asking for more licenses. And the league was tapping the brakes on it, because they knew it was a source of great revenue for the players." In 1994, the Players' Association created its own trading card brand called "Be A Player," which pictured players in either NHLPA jerseys or in regular clothes participating in leisure activities like playing pool or golf. Be A Player cards also included one autographed card in every pack, which was unheard of at the time. Costing more than $5 per pack, Be A Player cards weren't exactly cheap, but the allure of a guaranteed autograph made the set popular enough that the NHL licensed the set two years later.

HOBBY HULLABALOO

Hockey card collecting and the Sport Card Expo are still going strong since COVID restrictions were lifted **BY SAL BARRY**

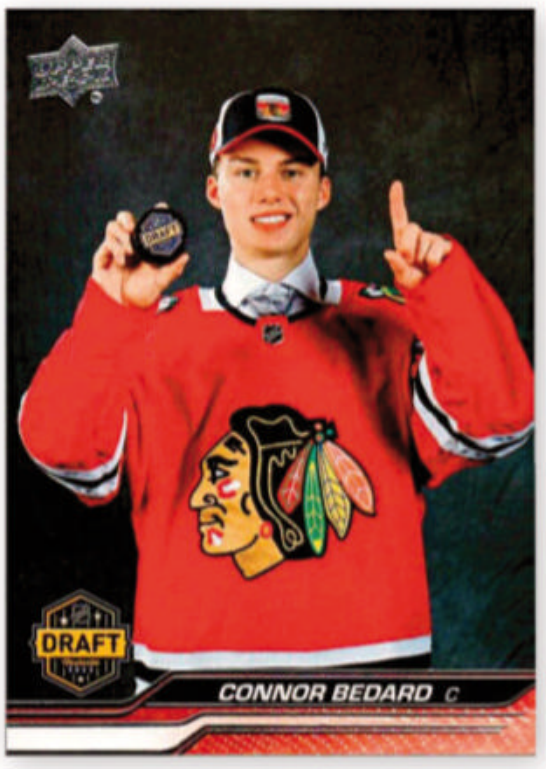
WHILE HOCKEY CARD collecting has cooled down a bit since the pandemic-fuelled fervor of the early 2020s, it's still very much a growing hobby.

The Fall 2023 Sport Card Expo, held Nov. 9-12, is proof of that. It was the largest Expo to date since the show began in 1991. It's the biggest sports card show in Canada and is held twice a year, in the spring and fall. The Fall 2023 Expo filled just fewer than 200,000 square feet across three halls at the International Centre in Mississauga, Ont. More than 500 dealers sold hockey cards and memorabilia, as well as cards from other sports and cards from non-sports entities like Pokemon.

Retired NHL superstar Marcel Dionne, who attended the Expo to sign autographs and participate in a panel discussion with his former L.A. Kings 'Triple Crown' linemates, Dave Taylor and Charlie Simmer, sees the growth. "The card industry is taking over," he said. "There are more people now with their card cases, who walk around and sell these cards for $500, $600. I've even seen cards for $8,000. So, now, everybody gets behind it. If you count all the tables right now, there's more tables of dealers selling cards than anything else."

Indeed, hockey cards were the main draw at the Expo, with dealers selling everything from vintage cards more than 100 years old to current cards of the newest NHL stars. Cards of Chicago Blackhawks rookie Connor Bedard were especially in demand. Over the past few seasons, Bedard has appeared on cards picturing him with the WHL's Regina Pats or Canada's WJC team. But a card of him in a Hawks sweater finally surfaced in the 2023-24 Upper Deck Series One Hockey set. "The hockey market is still very dependent on its rookies," said Billy Celio, senior product manager at Upper Deck. "When you have someone like Bedard coming into the league, obviously, you have a big spike in interest."

Upper Deck could not officially include a card of Bedard in its 2023-24 Upper Deck Series One Hockey set since he hadn't yet played in an NHL game while the set was being produced. But the card company obtained permission from the NHL to picture the Hawks rookie on a short-printed surprise card, found about once in every 24 boxes of Series One. Around 10 dealers at the Expo had this card for sale, usually asking about $700 for it. And while Bedard has played up to expectations in his rookie campaign, most of that price is fuelled by speculation, not performance. "There's a lot more investors or people who want to get cards and sell them or flip them," Celio said. "But there's still a lot of collectors. And that's the one thing I'll say about hockey collectors: there's a consistent number of them who enjoy building the sets."



Another indicator that the hobby is still growing is the number of autograph guests at the Expo. There were 34 retired or current

FULL HOUSE OF CARDS

The Fall 2023 Sport Card Expo was the biggest to date, with 500 dealers and droves of collectors.

TOP: PHOTO COURTESY OF SPORT CARD EXPO; BEDARD: PHOTO COURTESY OF UPPER DECK

NHLers signing at the four-day show, including current Maple Leafs players Max Domi, Joseph Woll and Matthew Knies, plus Hall of Famers Ray Bourque, Peter Forsberg, Bernie Parent and Mike Vernon and fan favorites Carey Price, Wendel Clark and Dave 'Tiger' Williams.

"People may argue that too many autograph guests pull cash out of the room, but my dealers did great," said Steve Menzie, president and owner of the Sport Card Expo. "The autograph guests did great as well. My biggest success determinant is how the dealers do, and I got great feedback from the dealers. I was thrilled with that."

Not only did the Fall Expo have its most autograph guests in the show's 32-year history, but it also had its highest attendance as well. "Every show since COVID has been bigger than the last," said Menzie, who made the Expo a virtual event three times during the pandemic lockdown before returning to in-person shows in November 2021. "I watched the advance-ticket sales and thought they were great. I expected sales to be slower at the door, but that wasn't the case. Ticket sales at the door were crazy."

Although the popularity of hockey cards and card shows like the Expo have steadily climbed over the past couple years, the prices of many hockey cards have trended downward. Some are mistaking this as the hobby cooling off when, in fact, it appears to be normalizing.

"Cards had a huge spike in interest during COVID," said Chris Worczak, owner of Niagara Sports Cards in Niagara Falls, N.Y. "It's come down a lot since then. I hear a lot of people say, because of the drop in value, that cards are dead, that the hobby is over, nobody's into it anymore. Well, those people don't understand the hobby. It's still better than pre-COVID."

One factor driving prices was that cards graded by companies such as PSA were selling for big bucks during the pandemic, especially if they had a high grade. This led many novice collectors to seek out "raw" – that is, ungraded – copies of certain cards to submit for grading.

For example, an ungraded 1990-91 O-Pee-Chee Premier rookie card of Jaromir Jagr was selling for $10 to $15 prior to the pandemic. However, during the COVID lockdown, PSA 10 ("Gem Mint") graded copies of the card skyrocketed in value on eBay, climbing from $300 in December 2020 to $725 by February 2021. This caused ungraded copies of the card to sell for upward of $100, with cards of many other players experiencing similar trends.

"There was a big demand because people saw what the PSA 10s were going for," said Mike Bergman of Lower Level Sports Cards in Winnipeg. "Those coming into the hobby thought every single ungraded Jagr rookie would grade at a PSA 10, so they were buying them to send to PSA."

The surge of raw cards submitted to PSA, Beckett and other grading companies caused these companies to temporarily stop accepting card submissions until they could get caught up. And it's safe to say, these companies are now caught up. Many of the tables at the Fall 2023 Expo were packed with graded cards – and not all at the highest grades, either.

"Social-media influencers do a great job of spreading word about the hobby and getting people into it," Bergman said. "But you also have to listen to people who have been in the hobby a while and get their take on it, too, because we could have prevented a lot of heartbreak for people sending in cards to get graded that weren't going to get a good grade."

The high prices that many graded and ungraded cards were selling for during the lockdown have reset closer to pre-pandemic prices. And though "investors" – armed with their carrying cases full of high-value cards – are here to stay, so are many new collectors who are in the hobby because it's fun. "The growth in the number of kids coming is great," Menzie said. "I think everybody loves to see that."

Added Worczak: "I was doing shows in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it's better now than it was back then. And back then was crazy. This is even crazier."

Dionne was joined by his 'Triple Crown' linemates Taylor and Simmer at the Sport Card Expo.

PRICE: PHOTO COURTESY OF SPORT CARD EXPO; PANEL: PHOTO BY CLEMENTE LISI

'IN HIS FIRST GAME IN THE NHL, HE WAS THE BEST PLAYER ON THE ICE'

John Paddock, who was coach and GM of the Regina Pats during **Connor Bedard's** WHL career, has been keeping a close eye on the young star's big-league progress, and, like just about everyone else, he's plenty impressed with what he's seen so far

BY GARE JOYCE

CONNOR BEDARD

CONNOR BEDARD'S RUN TO a Calder Trophy was rudely interrupted when a crushing hit by New Jersey's Brendan Smith fractured his jaw in Game No. 39 of his rookie seson. Bedard's time on the IR is a disappointing turn of events, but it doesn't change the fact that, through the first half-season of his NHL career, he has impressed and occasionally astounded fans and industry professionals alike.

Many of the former who were really seeing him for the first time have been surprised about his immediate installation on the Chicago Blackhawks' first line and the more-than-occasional flashes of brilliance. Those who had seen him more in the past might have been dazzled by Bedard's skills, but they were expecting about as much.

That he was scoring at a 30-goal pace as an 18-year-old rookie and became the youngest player ever to earn an NHL All-Star Game nod came as no surprise to the knowing eye of a hockey lifer who saw more of him than anyone else over the past three seasons: John Paddock, who was GM of the Regina Pats throughout Bedard's time in the WHL and added coaching duties from November 2021 through the end of 2022-23.

CONNOR BEDARD

"If there was any thought they were going to ease Connor into the lineup and give him a chance to get his feet wet, it didn't last longer than a couple of shifts in his first game," said the 69-year-old Paddock, who retired from both roles with the Pats last summer. "Right away, he was on the ice for more than 20 minutes (per game). In his first game in the league, he was the best player on the ice by (the eye test) and the analytics, and he wasn't playing against just anybody. He was on the ice with Sidney Crosby. Connor's driving play when he's on the ice. And he's made the transition to the league seamlessly.

"What I've seen from him so far is what I've seen from him before. Whenever he's moved up a level and plays with and against better players, he's met the moment and raised his game. We saw that when he went to the world juniors, what you'd call a step up from (the WHL), and was lights-out. The bigger the moment is, the better the level of competition, he's going to adapt to it, and it winds up bringing that much more out of his game."

Paddock more than qualifies as an industry pro: he was a winger who played 87 NHL games with Washington, Philadelphia and Quebec in the 1970s and '80s and logged nine seasons in the AHL. His coaching career started in the AHL, and he worked his way to the NHL for five seasons – four in Winnipeg in the 1990s and a final turn with the Ottawa Senators in 2007-08. And when Paddock wasn't behind the bench, he was still around the rink in various capacities for NHL squads. He signed on as the Pats' coach and senior VP of hockey ops in 2014 and stayed with the team through the end of Bedard's time in Regina.

In Paddock's first winter in decades spent neither on the ice nor in the stands on a regular basis, he's still managed to keep track of Bedard, and not just by watching highlights. In fact, for his first trip to an arena post-retirement, he made the trek to Chicago for Bedard's first home game with the Blackhawks. And he caught a momentous debut – Bedard scored just 90 seconds into the game against the defending Stanley Cup-champion Golden Knights. "They lost the Vegas game (5-3), but he made a statement in every game in his first few weeks of the season," Paddock said.

CONNOR UP CLOSE

Paddock got to see the details of Bedard's game during their three years together in Regina.

If you broach the idea that playing with linemates who are NHLers allows Bedard to raise his game, Paddock will push back. He maintains that Bedard is hardly set up for success with the Blackhawks. Not yet.

"From what I've seen, Chicago doesn't really have players with the skills that complement Connor," Paddock said. "Everyone knows about his ability to shoot the puck. Even among (the NHL's elite), there really isn't anyone like him. What people don't mention as much is his vision on the ice. He processes the game so fast, and his playmaking might wind up being better than the other franchise centers in the league. The problem is that a lot of his wingers don't have the sense of anticipation or the skills to cash in on the chances he creates. When he gets wingers, real first-liners, I expect he'll take his game to another level.

"What has made Connor's performance even more impressive is the fact that he's done all this against the other teams' best players. Other teams have been putting out their best against him from Game 1. That's respect for him, but it also says something about the lack of another (Blackhawks) line that's a real threat."

While fans and media strain for comparables, Paddock envisions Bedard developing into a player whose skill set stands distinct from the league's established premier talents.

MELANIE, MADDIE, TOM & CONNOR BEDARD, ALAN MILLAR & JOHN PADDOCK

"Connor's not going to be in the category of (Connor) McDavid or (Nathan) MacKinnon (with regard to skating), but he's still going to be elite," Paddock said. "He'll bring more speed to his game than Crosby does, but then again, Sid's is a power game on the cycle, and I don't think (Connor) is going in that direction. In his draft year, he was very comfortable at 185 pounds, and I think he can play at 195 eventually, but not more than that. He's not going to (physically) develop like Crosby. Not that same way."

Bedard's small miracle of a season was interrupted by Smith's big hit – and there's been a history of 18-year-olds who were tearing up the league before getting knocked out of the lineup due to injury (for example, McDavid and, further back, Ilya Kovalchuk). Paddock believes Bedard, however disappointed, won't be stewing on the sidelines: "He keeps things in perspective pretty well."

Nevertheless, Paddock thinks Chicago's lack of success would have been a source of frustration for Bedard. The Hawks had the league's second-worst record, ahead of only San Jose, when Bedard went down.

"That has to wear on him," Paddock said. "There's been some tough losses, and they'll likely lose more games than they'll win (when he returns to the lineup), and he will not be a happy guy. Still, I don't think he had any illusions. He knew when Chicago drafted him that he was walking into a rebuild. He's young, but he sees the big picture. The same way in the game that he sees the whole 200 feet, he gets that there's a lot in play." H

KEITH HERSHMILLER PHOTOGRAPHY/REGINA PATS

THE BEDARD BREAKDOWN

Connor Bedard has more than matched the hype as an NHL rookie on a superstar trajectory. How's he doing it? We talked to NHL pro scouts, who looked at 10 different facets of the Blackhawks prodigy's game

BY KEN CAMPBELL

NICK TURCHIARO-USA TODAY SPORTS

HE HAS ALREADY SUCCESSFULLY executed 'The Michigan,' is part of a confusing and cringeworthy car commercial and – before sustaining a broken jaw that sent him to the sidelines in early January – had six multi-point games to his credit.

All in all, 18-year-old Connor Bedard has come to the NHL as advertised – and, considering the years of hype prior to his arrival, that's saying something. In some ways, he has even exceeded the enormous fanfare that preceded his NHL debut. There have been stunning displays of skill and agility and the on- and off-ice poise of a veteran. When the puck is on his stick, there's no telling what might happen, but it's usually good.

After three years of playing for amateur scouts, Bedard is now performing in front of veteran hockey observers whose job it is to compare him and other players against the best players on the planet. Pro scouts don't watch a lot of junior hockey, and the first time a good number of them saw Bedard play in person was when they worked a Chicago Blackhawks game this season.

And he's impressing them. Faced with tough matchups every night and a depleted roster whose veteran presence was gutted with the injuries and exits of Taylor Hall, Andreas Athanasiou and Corey Perry, there was no hiding or insulating Bedard. Prior to his injury – which was expected to keep him out until at least early March – no rookie forward had logged more ice time, taken more shots, scored more goals or registered more points. "I liked him going into the year," said one pro scout. "But he has exceeded my expectations."

Here's what pro scouts have seen from the 5-foot-10, 185-pound Bedard this season in 10 key areas of the game:

SHOOTING

ANYONE WHO WATCHED BEDARD play minor hockey maintains that he had an NHL shot by the time he was 13. Five years later, he has an elite NHL shot, among the best in the league. Like, we're talking Auston Matthews good. "There's a release factor that is different," said another scout. "You can't explain it, but it's there. There's a release there that really fools goaltenders because he beats them clean." The scout pointed to the overtime-winner Bedard scored against Winnipeg Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck in late December as a prime example. "Hellebuyck doesn't miss those pucks," he said. "It was a draw snap that beat him clean from the high slot. There has to be something about that shot that is fooling goalies. You look at it and you say, 'Why wouldn't the goaltender have made that save?' "

CONNOR BEDARD

HOCKEY IQ

ONE OF THE THINGS that makes Bedard so special is that he has an elite mind to go along with his raw skill level. That's a dangerous combination because it allows him to be as good a set-up man as he is a goal-scorer. "The interesting thing is, it's his anticipation that sets him apart," said a scout. "He goes to the spots where he's expecting things to happen. I don't want to make an outrageous comparison, but you remember the passes (Wayne) Gretzky would make that would lead the player. That's what this kid does. From both ends. He goes to the place where the pass might come, and he throws the pass to the place someone will be."

STICKHANDLING

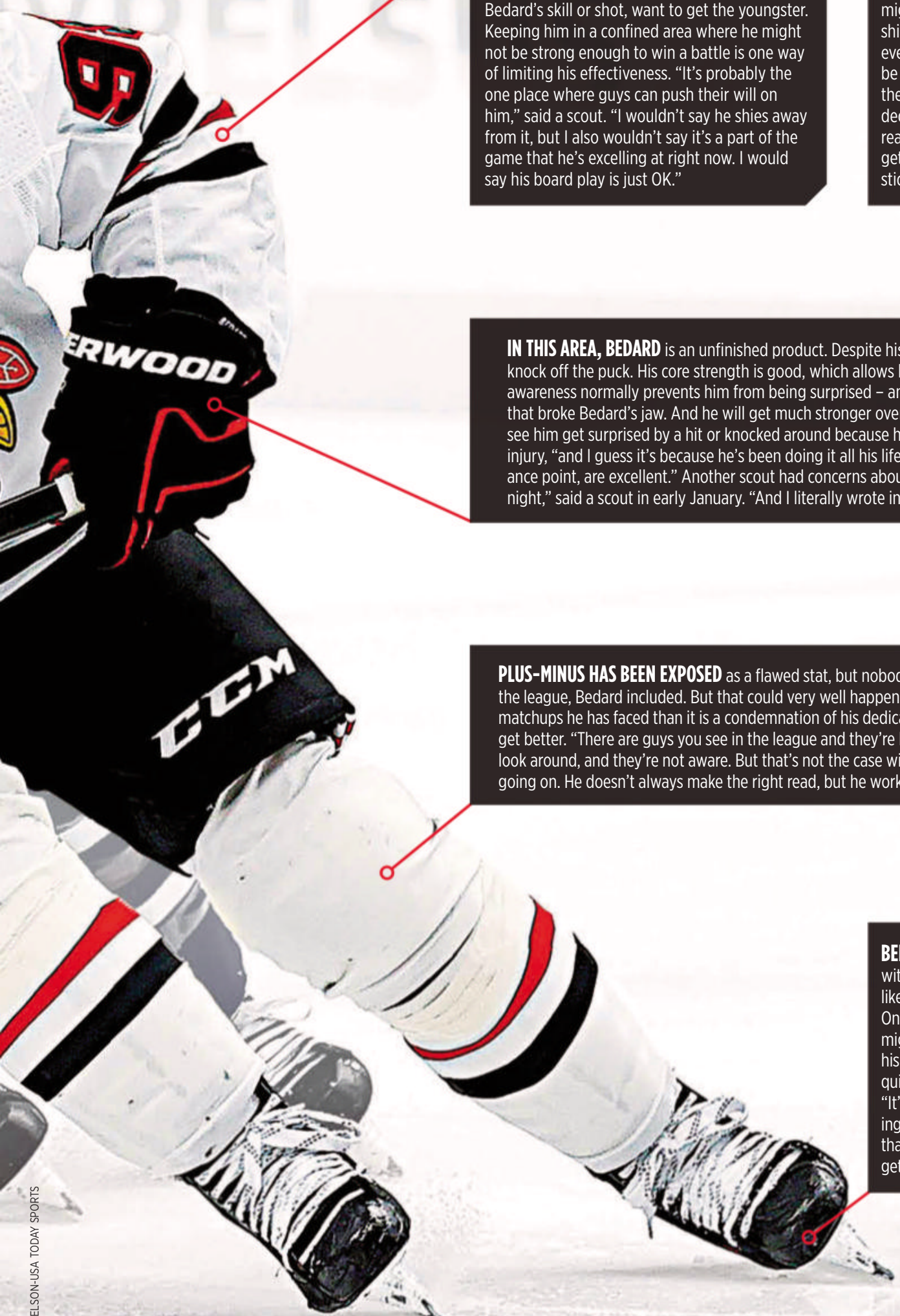
IT MIGHT BE THE size factor, or it could be Bedard is having to adjust to a league where players are on him much more quickly, but one scout said, Bedard, as a rookie, has become more of a give-and-go player than a puck-lugger. "He can't be caught carrying the puck because of his size," the scout said. "He has puck skills, no doubt about that, and you can see it with what he does around the net. But I don't see him beating people with his stick as much as his mind." One thing that helps Bedard's game is his ability to make explosive cutbacks, a tool that gives a player much more time and space when he's carrying the puck.

PASSING

SOME FANS MAY FEEL frustration when Bedard passes up on shots, which was something he tended to do more at the beginning of the season. His passing is, quite simply, terrific. And its effect will be magnified when the Blackhawks surround him with more players who will be able to convert those sweet dishes into goals. "I've seen him make passes on the power play through the (penalty-killing) diagonal that a lot of guys who have played for years in the league can't do," said a scout. "I think his passing skills are as good as his shooting skills are. It's too bad all those guys are gone because I see him having to lug the puck on his own, and I don't think that's to his advantage."

FACEOFFS

SIDNEY CROSBY HAD A 45.5-percent success rate on faceoffs in his rookie season, and Connor McDavid came in at 41.2 percent. Before his injury, Bedard was slightly lower than that, just keeping his head above 40 percent. There's no reason to believe that Bedard will not follow Crosby and McDavid and improve exponentially over the next couple of seasons. "I think it speaks more of the National Hockey League than it does the player," said a scout. "I suspect he'll just have to go through that maturity stage where he learns about the guys in the league and learns from the guys in the league."



BOARD PLAY

ONE SCOUT SAID THIS is where veteran players, especially those who might not be able to match Bedard's skill or shot, want to get the youngster. Keeping him in a confined area where he might not be strong enough to win a battle is one way of limiting his effectiveness. "It's probably the one place where guys can push their will on him," said a scout. "I wouldn't say he shies away from it, but I also wouldn't say it's a part of the game that he's excelling at right now. I would say his board play is just OK."

DECEPTION

IF BEDARD WERE ANY more deceptive, he'd be in the CIA and not the NHL. One scout said that might change once the league experiences his shiftiness a few times, but the problem is that even if they know what's coming, they may still be powerless to stop it. "He's deceptive with the puck, but what really impresses me is how deceptive he is with his feet," said a scout. "He's really sneaky, and he has great edges. He can get laterally really quick, and he uses a long stick. He's excellent at it."

STRENGTH

IN THIS AREA, BEDARD is an unfinished product. Despite his lack of size, he's thick and not easy to knock off the puck. His core strength is good, which allows him to bounce off defenders, and his awareness normally prevents him from being surprised – an exception being the Brendan Smith hit that broke Bedard's jaw. And he will get much stronger over the course of his career. "I have yet to see him get surprised by a hit or knocked around because he wasn't aware," said a scout before the injury, "and I guess it's because he's been doing it all his life...His hockey strength, his legs and his balance point, are excellent." Another scout had concerns about burnout. "I watched him just the other night," said a scout in early January. "And I literally wrote in my report, 'He looks a little beat up.' "

DEFENSIVE PLAY

PLUS-MINUS HAS BEEN EXPOSED as a flawed stat, but nobody wants to finish with the worst minus in the league, Bedard included. But that could very well happen, which is more an indicator of the brutal matchups he has faced than it is a condemnation of his dedication to being a two-way player. Things will get better. "There are guys you see in the league and they're lazy (defensively)," said a scout. "They don't look around, and they're not aware. But that's not the case with Bedard. He's aware, and he knows what's going on. He doesn't always make the right read, but he works hard to get back up ice and get on pucks."

SKATING

BEDARD IS NOT GOING to blow anyone away with his skating alone, but it's very good and will likely get better as he gets physically stronger. One pro scout said that while a lot of players might be faster straight-away, Bedard gets up to his top speed swiftly and has lateral and turning quickness that is far better than NHL average. "It's deceptive." said one scout of Bedard's skating. "Very deceptive. He has a little more speed than you think. He can separate on his edges and get to the open spaces really well." H

PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS

BROCK FABER

STAY AT HOME DEFENSEMAN

Minnesota born-and-bred **Brock Faber** is playing more than any other NHL rookie, and he's putting up points, too. And while the Calder Trophy depends on the health of you-know-who, don't forget about the two-way D-man with elite mobility and hockey smarts

BY RYAN KENNEDY

SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

TOYOTA
CCM
MINNESOTA WILD
7
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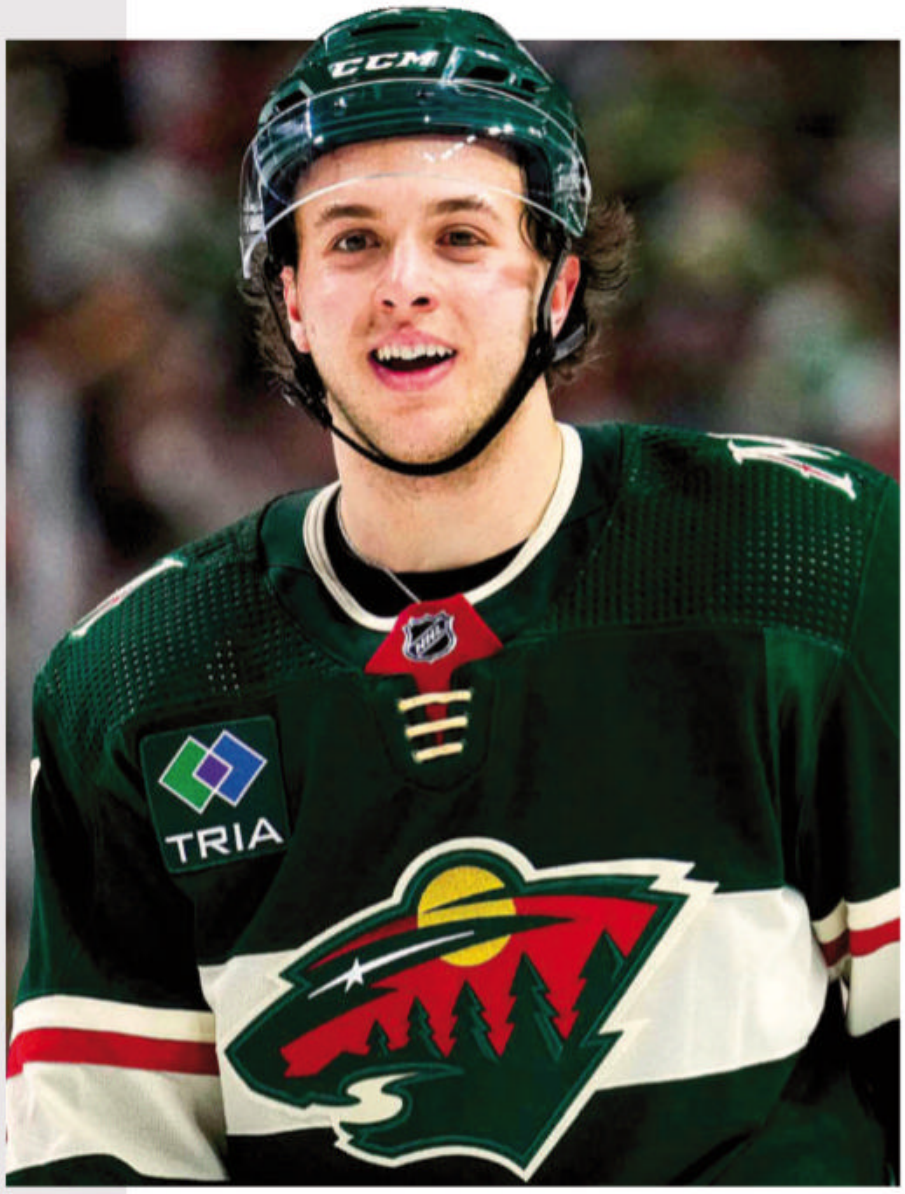
BROCK FABER



TAKE A LOOK AT the list of NHL ice-time leaders this season, and you'll see a lot of familiar faces: Drew Doughty, John Carlson, Cale Makar and so on. But sandwiched right between Rasmus Dahlin and Kris Letang is a new name: Minnesota rookie Brock Faber.

At just 21, Faber was playing 24:47 per game through mid-January, and when the Wild needed him most, he was sometimes on the ice for literally half the game, as he had already done five times this year. And you don't get to play more than 30 minutes in a contest without doing something right.

While Faber was also vying for the lead among freshmen blueliners in scoring, perhaps even more impressive is the work he does in shutting down the opposition. The Wild have been dominating opponents at 5-on-5 when Faber is on the ice, scoring significantly more goals than they surrender. Simply put, this is a young man with a special set of tools. "You love his feet, right?" said Brad Bombardir, Minnesota's director of player development. "Because his feet drive his game. Great legs. He closes on guys really quickly, and that's how he can defend so well. He can get to loose pucks quickly and win those 50-50 puck battles. But he also has a really good hockey mind. He has a really good feel for the game and a good rhythm to his game, too. Those are the things we appreciate about him."

Born and raised in Minnesota, Faber is living every kid's dream right now. And while he was originally destined for sunny California, it's hard to imagine what this season would have been like for the Wild without him.

Faber was drafted in the second round (45th overall) by the Los Angeles Kings in 2020 and would have been a great fit in their lineup eventually, but a star scorer was too tempting to pass up. Kevin Fiala was acquired by the Kings from Minnesota in the summer of 2022, and the price was Faber and a first-round pick (Liam Ohgren, who just won silver with Sweden at the world juniors).

He was still at the University of Minnesota at the time, and needless to say, he was surprised. "Yeah, I was," he said. "Being traded to my hometown team is something I'm so grateful for. I grew up watching the Wild and going to their games all the time. It was two great

BRACE HEMMELGARN-USA TODAY SPORTS

IMMEDIATE IMPACT

Faber has played 30 minutes on some nights, and the Wild win battles when he's on the ice.

BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS

scenarios. I was so happy with L.A., and how much time they spent with me was awesome."

For a kid who grew up in the suburb of Maple Grove, his NHL team was now just a short drive from home. And the Xcel Energy Center was also just a few miles away from where he lived while playing for the Golden Gophers in college.

Faber did make a detour for a couple years, however, leaving Minnesota for the slightly less-frigid expanses of Michigan, where he played for USA Hockey's National Team Development Program. "Playing at the NTDP helped me take a huge step defensively," he said. "I was actually a forward growing up, but I went there and really learned how to play defense thanks to the coaches and the program they have set up. It's something I've always taken pride in."

On top of an exemplary NCAA career that included two straight trips to the Frozen Four – including a gut-punch overtime loss to Quinnipiac in last year's championship game – Faber also had one of the most special experiences possible in hockey when he suited up for Team USA at the 2022 Olympics in Beijing. Since the pandemic was still raging, NHL players did not participate, and instead, the Americans sent a cohort of youngsters mixed with non-NHL veterans to play in a bubble in China. Faber's teammates included other young guns such as Toronto's Matthew Knies (who also played with him on the Gophers) and Seattle's Matty Beniers. "It was a really cool experience for all of us, something you dream of as a kid," Faber said. "To be able to go to a place like Beijing that is so different than where you're from, it was just really cool to see and

BROCK FABER

experience. Would have liked a different outcome (the U.S. lost to Slovakia in the quarterfinal), but I learned a ton. That was my first experience playing some grown-up hockey. College and world juniors is such a high level, but playing there was a whole different level of physicality and speed and skill, and every guy is so smart. It helped me take a step in my game, that's for sure. It helped me realize what it takes to play at the next level."

Now, we are seeing that next level. Not to grind the point into the ground too far, but Faber's ability to defend in the NHL at his age is simply incredible. Talk to those who know the game and they'll point out that when Faber is defending a rush, his skates always remain firmly straight, which forces the puck-carrier to make the first move. This game of chicken gives Faber the advantage because eventually the attacker either runs out of space, gets caught by the backchecker or has to commit to a lane. And when they do, Faber's fast feet are there to put him in position to neutralize, much like vintage Marc-Edouard Vlasic or Jaccob Slavin. Toss in the ice time and you've got quite the story. "I don't even know how to explain it, to be honest," Bombardir said. "It's incredible. Again, it's about his feet and legs, and that's his energy, plus his intelligence, how he gets around the ice. He can save some energy to be able to play those minutes. He does a really good job staying in the right spots, too, and not getting overextended on the ice. It's really tough to explain what he's been able to do while playing that amount of minutes."

It has still been a challenge, of course. The NCAA schedule is famously practice-heavy and game-light, so 82 games is going to be a lot for Faber, who got an NHL taste in two games with the Wild last year after the Gophers were done. He's doing everything he can to prepare for the second half, taking his supplements and loading up on all the best proteins, fruits and vegetables that an NHL franchise can provide. "Going into my first real NHL season, you try to prepare yourself as much as you can, but you don't really know what to expect," he said. "The longer the season goes on, I try to get better with my habits and sleep. Rest, recovery, diet. It all goes into it. I'm learning as I go and learning from the guys that came before me and watching what they do."

> "I'VE BEEN A WILD FAN MY WHOLE LIFE, SO BEING ABLE TO PLAY FOR THE HOMETOWN TEAM IS A DREAM COME TRUE" — BROCK FABER

And even someone as defensively advanced as Faber has met his match on occasion this season. "(Connor) McDavid, obviously," he said. "He's on a whole other level, that's for sure. He's a challenge every time you play him, and we weren't able to shut him down."

Which, hey, is understandable. But as the Wild attempt to survive in the murderous Central Division, they can at least be confident that the future continues to look bright thanks to youngsters such as Faber, Marco Rossi and Matt Boldy. The fact Faber is Minnesota-bred is just the cherry on top, even if it means extra pressure. "It's incredible for me and my family," he said. "I've been a Wild fan my whole life, so being able to play for the hometown team is a dream come true for sure. A lot of family and friends come to each game, and I have to say no to some people. I'm always getting texts for tickets. It's a challenge but one I'm thankful for. It's a good problem to have, for sure."

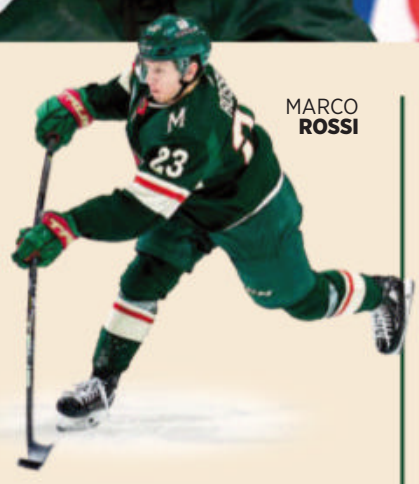
Faber's calm under such pressure has been noted by the team's brass, too. "It's a great story, and I know he enjoys playing in Minnesota," Bombardir said. "What I've been really impressed with is that it's not easy for young guys to play in the places they grew up, especially that being the first stop in their NHL career. It's a testament to his maturity, focus and character that he's been able to do that while having a tremendous amount of success. It's not easy to do, and it shows his character. It's driven him to have a great start to his career."

With Connor Bedard missing months due to a broken jaw, what seemed to be a sewn-up Calder Trophy race is now wide open. A number of forwards will have a chance to catch up to Bedard, but Faber's combination of points and defensive usage make him a front-runner. Either way, he's already turned heads in Minnesota. "He's a great guy and fun to be around," Rossi said. "On the ice, he's such a good skater. So powerful. He plays almost 30 minutes a game, which is crazy, and I'm happy for him. And he's so smart. He knows exactly where the puck is going to be."

And to think, this is only the beginning of Faber's NHL adventure.

DAN HAMILTON-USA TODAY SPORTS

WORTH THE WAIT



MARCO **ROSSI**

Marco Rossi overcame a health scare after being drafted ninth overall in 2020, and now he's repaying the Wild for their patience

BY RYAN KENNEDY

CHEERING FOR MARCO ROSSI is easy. The gifted Austrian center was one of the most talented players in the 2020 draft class, and Minnesota did well in plucking him ninth overall. But a brutal health scare during the pandemic, in which he battled the heart condition known as myocarditis, put everything in jeopardy for the youngster. Thankfully, he made it back to athletic form eventually, but his breakout in the NHL took longer than originally anticipated. That breakthrough is now.

Recovering from his health shock was hard, but Minnesota was willing to be patient. "Of course it bothered him, and I think it bothered him for a while even when he was back," said Brad Bombardir, director of player development for the Wild. "It took some time, and that's all it is. Trying to play in the NHL for a young guy is tough. It's tough for guys in *incredible* shape who are ready to roll, so he had a couple extra challenges to get through. And he did it. Most of the time, you have to be patient with young guys because it's a tough league to break into, and he's proving that being patient is starting to pay off."

HAPPY AND PRODUCTIVE

Rossi could very well take over the rookie scoring lead after Bedard's injury.

Rossi also had a big summer. After playing for Austria at the World Championship, he went home for 10 days but then came back to Minnesota, where he trained the rest of the off-season. "It was a huge summer for me," he said. "I improved a lot. Matt Harder is our strength coach, and Andy Ness is our skills coach, and they both did an unreal job with me. I was working out with Brock, and it was nice to be around him and the other guys."

Rossi has been honing in on his consistency, something he believes is key to maintaining an NHL standard for a schedule that is basically a game every other night, give or take. From faceoffs to shooting more and creating chances, he's looking at the total package. "He's really finding his groove this year, and he deserves it," Faber said. "He worked to get bigger, stronger and faster and found his confidence. He's a huge reason why, even with injuries and losing struggles, we still have a chance to get back on the right side of things. He's been great, and it's really cool to see."

Faber also lauded Rossi for his work ethic during those sessions, and that's something the Wild brass saw as well in the summer. The player who tallied just one point in 19 NHL games last year was suddenly all over the scoresheet. "He was laser-focused, and that's just him, he pays attention to every detail," Bombardir said. "He knew that he did the work and knew he was prepared, so he built his confidence that way. So, when he got onto the ice, he knew he was quicker and stronger, which allowed him to have a good start to the season."

Dating back to his days in junior with the OHL's Ottawa 67's, Rossi has always been an offensive threat. He was the OHL's most outstanding player in 2019-20 after posting 120 points in just 56 games, which was the highest of anyone in major junior. And the responsible side of his game meant he could be counted on defensively, too. "He sees the game quickly, and he can move pucks quickly," Bombardir said. "When he has the puck on his stick, he can make things happen. So, when he gets it, he makes his play because he knows his options. That's a special part of his game."

Rossi has been one of the top rookie scorers in the league this year, and with Connor Bedard on the shelf with a broken jaw, the Wild center had a chance to make up serious ground. Now, Rossi will continue to drive. The prospect we anticipated is blossoming in front of our eyes, and for a Minnesota team in need of more weapons, it's welcome news. Just don't expect him to be satisfied yet. "It's really nice to play for the team and the fans," Rossi said. "My season is going pretty good. I'm pretty happy. Though I'm a guy that's never really *too* happy. I always want to get better and improve. But I'm pretty happy."

TOP: DAN HAMILTON-USA TODAY SPORTS; MIDDLE: BRACE HEMMELGARN-USA TODAY SPORTS

CONNOR ZARY

ANOTHER CONNOR TO CONSIDER

Edmonton has a pretty good Connor, and Chicago does, too. And while nobody is saying that Calgary's **Connor Zary** is going to turn into McDavid or Bedard, the Flames have an undeniable offensive weapon in the playmaking, sharpshooting rookie

BY JARED CLINTON

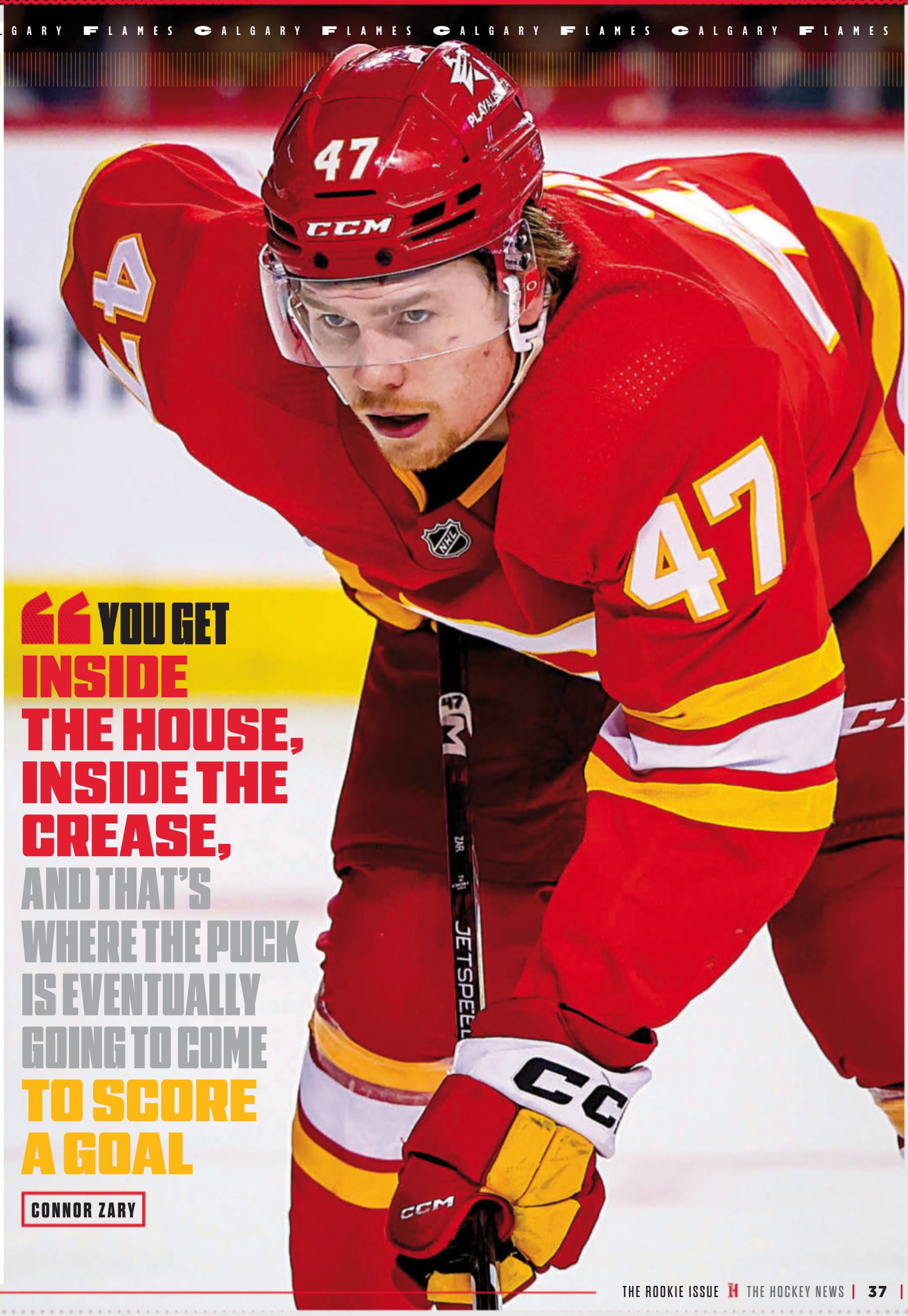
DEPENDING ON THE company you keep, the saying "Saskatchewan is difficult to spell but easy to draw" is either considered a fun-loving slogan or a wry jab about provincial plainness. Among locals, it has doubtless served as both. And while city-slicking outsiders have made a habit of distilling the sparsely populated territory down to one defined by six months of flat farmland and six months of frigid and unforgiving cold, many who call the province home learn to love it, coming to embrace the charm and, yes, climate to make figurative and literal hay. Connor Zary is among them.

There is a tell, however, that Zary has perhaps had a difficult time explaining all there is to love about his home to those who haven't experienced life on the prairies. It comes in the way the Calgary Flames rookie prefaces and then professes his love of playing on an outdoor rink. "I know it might sound crazy that you could love winter…," Zary starts, before explaining that while he didn't exactly spend his youth wishing away the summer months, his favorite time of year was when the double-digit temperatures dipped then disappeared, with falling snow and windchill warnings arriving in their place by October. So deep-seated is Zary's zeal for twirling around the outdoor ice that the 22-year-old somehow found himself green with envy all the while three months into living his big-league dreams.

"My buddy was sending me pictures and texts because they were going to the outdoor rink the other day," Zary said. "Obviously, it's a little different that we're older now, but it kind of made me feel jealous. I'm here playing in the NHL, and I was pretty jealous of my buddies who were just at the outdoor rink in Saskatoon."

Despite it seeming an obvious rite of passage for many Canadian kids, it bears repeating just how much Zary cherished his time at community-center rinks, on ponds or any slapdash surface he could carve up. Whether it was at the park located a slapshot from his family home or on the backyard sheet that Zary begged his parents to build, hardly a day went by when he wasn't braving the elements to sharpen his skills or test a cheeky new deke. Before games. After games. It didn't matter. And it's all that time spent, as much as anything, that helped Zary develop the offensive tools – poise with the puck, playmaking vision and a shot with power and precision – that caught scouts' eyes early.

In time, his offensive abilities were what drew the attention of the Flames' brain trust, particularly after Zary turned heads with a top-five scoring season with the WHL's Kamloops Blazers. His 86-point performance in 57 games in his third year on the circuit was the precursor to Calgary making him a first-round selection (24th overall) in 2020, and Zary has followed a steady upward trajectory in the time since. The pandemic-related delay to the start of the 2020-21 WHL



"YOU GET INSIDE THE HOUSE, INSIDE THE CREASE, AND THAT'S WHERE THE PUCK IS EVENTUALLY GOING TO COME TO SCORE A GOAL

CONNOR ZARY

SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

season allowed him to see nine games of AHL action, where he notched three goals and seven points, and that cup-of-coffee stint with the Flames' farm club set the table for Zary to dive head-first into the pro game the following season.

Long is the list of players, though, whose major-junior success didn't instantly translate to effectiveness in the AHL overnight. It can be a difficult adjustment, and there were some teachable moments during Zary's time in the AHL. Don Nachbaur, whose coaching career spanned 20 WHL campaigns and a fistful of professional gigs prior to his landing as an assistant coach with the Flames' AHL club in 2021, said one of the first things Zary had to learn was the speed of the game. "What really jumped out at me, a lot of young guys come into the pro game and they get a little intimidated and forget what their skill set is," Nachbaur said. "(Zary) grabbed pucks in the AHL and, for me, probably hung on to them too long. We wanted him to move it a little quicker, so that was a process. But as far as compete, going to the right areas to make plays, going to the right areas to score, he had a good upbringing."

And, in point of fact, upbringing happens to be precisely the word. Because while the finer details and his offensive skill set have been carefully crafted, the determination that's a hallmark of Zary's game – or the "little junkyard dog" mentality, as Nachbaur called it – was instilled while growing up. "That's just something my dad beat down into my brain, that if you get to the front of the net, you're going to get rewarded eventually," Zary said. "It's easy to get away from that, especially when you get to junior or you become older or a higher-end player because you can play on the outside. That's something that (Nachbaur) reminded me of, that you get inside those dots, you get inside the house, inside the crease, and that's where the puck is eventually going to come to score a goal."

As much as Zary's desire to get his nose dirty in order to put the puck in the net caught the attention of the coaching staff, it was equally impressive to his teammates. Calgary Wranglers captain Brett Sutter, son of former Flames coach Darryl Sutter and a veteran of more than 1,000 AHL games, has seen a lot of Zary's early pro years, first as an opponent when Sutter was with the Ontario Reign and since as teammates over the past two campaigns. Zary's skill, as it often does, jumped out first, as did the way he wanted the puck on his tape. But what set him apart was his feistiness. "That's how you gain respect, not only from your teammates but around the league," Sutter said. "It's getting in there and not backing down and shying away from guys. As he's progressed here as a third-year pro, the strength part of that has really helped him, too. Aggressiveness is part of what makes him tick."

That bit of sandpaper is an important part of the package that put Zary on the Flames' NHL shortlist entering the season, albeit not high enough that he was able to muscle his way onto the opening-night roster. It was a sore spot for Zary, who admitted he was frustrated by Calgary's decision to send him

SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

MAKING AN ENTRANCE
Zary scored early in his first NHL game and has earned a spot on the Flames' top power-play unit.

to the AHL to start the season, particularly after he had what he thought was a really strong training camp. He knew, though, that his best course of action was putting his head down. "Be mad about it, but be mad in the right way," he said. "Go play harder and show them. That's what my mindset was, and they said to be ready and have the right attitude. I think I did a good job of that, and that led me to my opportunity."

Indeed, Zary made himself undeniable in the AHL at the start of the campaign. He was driving play, making an impact in all three zones and vandalizing the scoresheet to the tune of 10 points in six games. And he's been making his presence felt in the NHL almost from the moment he got the call. It was only three shifts into Zary's big-league debut on Nov. 1 that he netted his first NHL goal, and given the scouting report provided by Nachbaur and Sutter, it's remarkably fitting the tally was more a product of will than skill. Driving the net and getting behind Dallas Stars goaltender Jake Oettinger, Zary was hit by a shot only for the puck to drop at his skates, where he was able to dig it out and shovel it home.

And he's hardly slowed down since. Midway through the Flames' season, Zary's nine goals and 22 points were fifth (tied) and 11th-most for the Flames, respectively. Among rookies, those totals were good for fourth and fifth. Most impressively, though, among first-year players to appear in at least 12 games, only Chicago prodigy Connor Bedard had a higher points per game than Zary's 0.67, all the while the Calgary freshman ranked in the top 20 in goals and expected goals percentage among the same dozen-game cohort.

Undergirding his success has been a favorable spot in the lineup, which Zary has worked hard to earn and doesn't seem keen on relinquishing, at least if his output is any indication. The majority of his NHL minutes have been played alongside Nazem Kadri, be it at even strength or on the power play, where Zary has played his way into first-unit duty. But the key now is to continue learning while doing the things that got him here in the first place: being assertive, wanting the puck, looking to make plays and approaching the game with confidence.

"Everyone wants to be consistent with their game, but I think that's what makes the average player, or a good player, a great player," he said. "You're going to have off nights every once in a while, but if you can consistently be a good player and make plays and create things for your team, it's why I want to be out there and what I want to do. I still have a lot to learn and a lot to keep developing and working on in my game. I continue to do that in-season and out of season, and it's going to allow me to be a good player." H

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DMITRI VORONKOV

BETTER EVERY DAY

Dmitri Voronkov had a difficult transition to life in North America, but he's now fitting in and proving himself to be 'sneaky tough' on and off the ice in Columbus

BY KEN CAMPBELL

WHEN THE BUFFALO SABRES and Columbus Blue Jackets had their little play date in mid-December, it pitted the youngest and second-youngest rosters in the NHL against each other for the first time this season. The Sabres were so bad they probably had to go to bed without a bedtime story that night. The Blue Jackets, just 0.2 years older on average than the Sabres, got to stay up late and play mini-sticks at the team hotel after winning 9-4.

In the NHL, a young team sometimes grows to become a powerhouse. Other times, they go from being a bad young team to a bad older team. But it's fun to watch the exuberance and novelty, and with the Blue Jackets, the signs of youth are everywhere. They're on full display five nights earlier at Scotiabank Arena in Toronto when, after playing his first NHL game in his home city, 19-year-old rookie Adam Fantilli goes into the stands to meet hundreds of people who were there to watch him play. There, his father cups his son's head in his hands, kisses his cheeks and gives him a long, warm hug.

It's there in the corner stall of the visitors' dressing room, where Kent Johnson is waiting to talk to reporters after scoring the overtime-winner. Johnson is still too defiant to realize that maybe, just maybe, a short trip to the minors to start the season might have actually been good for him. "I'm a confident guy," Johnson said. "I don't think I'll ever admit that was what I needed."

You see it on the ice when the Blue Jackets take a 5-0 lead on one of the league's top teams through two periods, only to have the sphincters tighten up

RICK OSENTOSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

in a big way, then give up five goals before winning in the 3-on-3 session.

And you see it in a trio of players whose hometowns are separated by more than 1,500 miles in Siberia but who sit beside each other in the dressing room. Yegor Chinakhov, Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov certainly have the NHL talking, mostly to ask how the Jackets keep finding these guys. When Columbus took Chinakhov with their first-round pick in 2020, even the most ardent draft pundits were checking their lists to see if he was eligible.

Each of the three Russian youngsters is interesting in his own way, but the most intriguing might be Voronkov, a 6-foot-5, 240-pounder the Blue Jackets took in the fourth round (114th overall) of the 2019 draft and the guy who plays center on the line. "I don't know how I can describe him, other than he's extremely smart," said Columbus coach Pascal Vincent. "I had a guy in Winnipeg, Dustin Byfuglien, who was completely unique. There was no one like him. I feel Voronkov is that kind of guy because I can't compare him to anyone in the league right now. I would say that I don't know what his ceiling is right now. It could be really high."

Much of the mystery surrounds the fact that Voronkov came to North America this season without even a rudimentary grasp of English. It didn't help that his conditioning wasn't up to par when he arrived, and he was sent to the minors to start the season. When he came back up, and the Blue Jackets subsequently instructed him to get a place in Columbus, he said he was seriously considering returning home. At 23, with his girlfriend and everything he knew back in Russia, Voronkov was terribly homesick, even with four compatriots on the roster. It was touch-and-go for a while as Voronkov pondered going back.

But he stayed, and things have gotten better. Things are becoming less foreign with each passing day, and Marchenko translates for him. Voronkov lives in the same condo complex as Marchenko and Chinakhov, and the Blue Jackets are working on arranging the visas to get his girlfriend to the United States. On the ice, he is excelling with his linemates, making great plays and displaying a hockey sense well beyond his years. And he's starting to fit

DMITRI VORONKOV

YEGOR CHINAKHOV, JOHNNY GAUDREAU & DMITRI VORONKOV

COLUMBUS COMFORT

Initially homesick for his native Russia, Voronkov has found his place in the Blue Jackets' lineup.

in. "We joke around a lot, even though it's not speaking," Johnson said. "We're usually just messing around on the ice and in the room. He's a great guy, and I like him a lot. And he's learning (English) pretty well. It seems whenever he needs a word, he knows it somehow."

It can be easy to dismiss the cultural aspect of all of this, but consider how you'd feel if you were 23 and left everything familiar to you to live in Voronkov's hometown of Angarsk, which is nearly 2,600 miles east of Moscow and fewer than 400 miles from the Mongolian border. To explain it, Marchenko asks his questioner if he watches North American movies. Then, he asks if the interviewer has ever seen a Russian movie. "Just watch a Russian movie and you will see," Marchenko said. "It's all different. Everything is different. It's a different life. If you haven't been to Russia, you can't really understand us."

But that different life does not include playing in the best league in the world with the best players and having the opportunity to make the best money. While Voronkov was pondering returning, he spoke to people back home, and they reminded him of those things. Having Marchenko and Chinakhov so close to him on and off the ice really helps, too. "Everything is good now," Voronkov said. "The most important thing is on the ice. I'm feeling more comfortable on the ice and with the team. We're winning a little more, and things are going better."

It certainly didn't take Voronkov long to establish himself on the ice. On the second shift of his NHL career, he drilled an opponent from behind, then stood in and traded punches with him. That opponent happened to be Montreal's Arber Xhekaj, who had 101 penalty minutes and nine fighting majors last season. Xhekaj definitely got the better of Voronkov, but it wasn't a rout, and Voronkov finished the game with an assist, which meant he was just a goal shy of a Gordie Howe hat trick. Eleven days later, he got into it with Kevin Stenlund of the Florida Panthers, who was beating a path toward Fantilli after Fantilli nailed Carter Verhaeghe with a hard, clean hit. Since then, Voronkov has displayed a willingness to go to the dirty areas of the ice. "He's sneaky tough," Vincent said. "And there's no fear in his game."

It wouldn't be accurate to say Voronkov doesn't go look-

TOP: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

“I’M NOT A FIGHTER GUY. I WANT TO SCORE GOALS AND GET ASSISTS AND WIN GAMES

DMITRI VORONKOV

ing for physical confrontations, but doing so is not a big part of his game. There are videos out there of fights he had in the KHL, and it looks as though he’s capable of handling himself. “I’m not a fighter guy,” Voronkov said. “I want to score goals and get assists and win games.”

As for his hockey sense, he’s pretty direct, if not a little brash, in his response. “It’s a God-given gift,” he said.

Voronkov has delivered early in his rookie season, but it’s what he represents that has the Blue Jackets excited. He’s a big man who plays the middle of the ice, can score and make plays and displays a high level of hockey sense. There is undoubtedly a tantalizing array of talent and physical gifts that are just beginning to be mined. He’ll never be as gregarious as Marchenko, who has a permanent smile and actually pulled off the “forecheck, backcheck, paycheque” cliché to perfection earlier this season. But the hope is that once he gets over the language and cultural barriers that face him in North America, Voronkov will feel even more comfortable, and that will be bound to display itself on the ice. “You’d have to ask the coaches, but I’m working hard every practice and every game,” Voronkov said. “It’s the NHL. It’s a tough league. I always said, ‘Don’t worry about on the ice. I really like the NHL, and I like the style.’ I want to be better in this league. I want to score some goals and every day be better, and it’s a good challenge.”

Everything is a challenge for Voronkov at the moment, but Vincent has found his transition on the ice to be nothing short of remarkable. Even the mistakes

have provided teachable moments that are getting a little easier to deal with as Voronkov grasps more. The Blue Jackets started Voronkov as a winger, but they moved him to center fairly early in his NHL tenure. And his coach hasn’t really shielded him from facing quality opponents. “Even though he doesn’t speak the language, he’s completely part of the team,” Vincent said. “He’ll play tricks on guys, and he’s a fun guy to be around. He loves the games. He loves to be around the team, and he’s a good teammate. So, we’re really, really excited.” H

TOP: ERIC BOLTE-USA TODAY SPORTS; MIDDLE: TIMOTHY T. LUDWIG-USA TODAY SPORTS

TOP 10 CALDER

From a 13-game winner to a 31-year-old, there have been some unique storylines around the NHL's award for rookie of the year

BY KEN CAMPBELL

LONG BEFORE HIS grandson, Mike, was putting up three straight 100-point seasons in the NHL, American humorist Will Rogers observed, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." (OK, so it's not true about Will and Mike Rogers being related, but like Dickie Dunn in *Slap Shot*, we're just trying to capture the spirit of the thing here.) Will Rogers also said he never met a man he didn't like, which only means he never encountered Claude Lemieux.

It's a safe bet Rogers didn't have the Calder Trophy in mind when he coined his phrase about first impressions, but it kind of applies, no? Because when you think about it, the award for rookie of the year stands alone in that it is the only NHL trophy that players have one, and only one, crack at winning. Had a little trouble adjusting to the best league in the world? Suffered an injury? Played for a coach who made you a healthy scratch 10 times and put you on the fourth line? Were Nicklas Lidstrom in an era of Pavel Bure? Too bad.

THAT CRAZY CALDER

CALDER: CHRISTOPHER HANEWINCKEL-USA TODAY SPORTS

There are times when winning the Calder is a portent of greatness. Other times, not so much. Of the league's top 10 all-time scorers, Mario Lemieux is the only one who won a Calder. (Wayne Gretzky would have easily won in 1980 if not for his WHA experience. Instead, Ray Bourque won it that year.) It's an award that Gaye Stewart won over Rocket Richard, Howie Meeker over Gordie Howe, Ed Litzenberger over Jacques Plante and Andrew Raycroft over Patrice Bergeron.

The trophy that was established in 1933 and later named for NHL president Frank Calder has had an interesting history of winners to be sure. Here are 10 who were a little more intriguing, confounding and unlikely than the others:

1. FRANK BRIMSEK

1938-39

IN A LEAGUE THAT was overwhelmingly dominated by Canadian players, the square-jawed Brimsek came from the Iron Range in Minnesota. After winning an AHL championship Calder Cup with the Providence Reds in 1937-38, Brimsek usurped Vezina Trophy winner Tiny Thompson in the Boston Bruins' net and dominated the NHL in his first season. After posting shutouts in six of his first 10 games, 'Mr. Zero' went on to lead the Bruins to the Stanley Cup. (He led them to another two years later, in 1941.) The funny thing is, Brimsek was not the first American goalie to be named rookie of the year. He wasn't even the first goalie from his own hometown to win the award – Brimsek was named top rookie three years after fellow Eveleth native Mike Karakas. With Cully Dahlstrom winning the year before Brimsek, three of the NHL's first seven Calders were claimed by Minnesota natives.

2. JACK GELINEAU

1949-50

A SECOND WORLD WAR hero who survived a plane crash and rescued an injured airman from the burning aircraft, Gelineau came to the Bruins after earning a business degree at Montreal's McGill University. More than two decades before Ken Dryden did it, Gelineau was called up by the B's in the spring of his senior year at McGill and became the first player in more than three decades to play in the NHL while attending university. The same way Brimsek replaced Thompson, Gelineau took Brimsek's spot in the Bruins' net. After just two years with the Bruins, Gelineau left the game due to a contract dispute and took a job selling insurance in Montreal. Three years after leaving the Bruins, Gelineau made a comeback with the moribund Chicago Black Hawks in 1953-54, but he gave up 18 goals in two games before deciding selling insurance was preferable to constantly fishing the puck out of the back of the net.

FROM B TO SHINING B
Eleven years after Brimsek won the Calder, Gelineau claimed his crease – and the hardware.

Rookie Bruin Goalie Repays Faith

Plucky Gelineau Winning Fans Over

Ross Found Him Toiling With McGill

In Mr. Zero's Shoes

Finds Hawks Roy, Gaye, Worst Foes

JACK GELINEAU ... full of Boston beans

Some Very Able Assistants!

HOW CAN HE MISS with experts like these to lend sage advice. Left to right, Coach Rudy Boucher, veteran Milt Schmidt who's moved back to a defense post, Gollaens and Byng Trophy winner Bill Quackenbush.

3. GUMP WORSLEY

1952-53

HIS CAREER TOOK A fortuitous turn when he was dealt to the Montreal Canadiens, but Worsley finished his career with more losses than wins, and he got off to a great start on the all-time losses list in his rookie season with the New York Rangers. Worsley won the Calder despite winning just 13 of 50 games. And he was rewarded for his rookie-of-the-year performance by being dispatched to the minors the very next season. Worsley played nine more painful seasons with the Rangers before being dealt to the Canadiens, where he won four Cups and two Vezinas with a team that has been described as a forgotten dynasty. In parts of seven seasons with the Habs, Worsley lost just 41 games, 21 fewer than he did in his first two seasons with the Rangers.

4. ED LITZENBERGER

1954-55

HAD LITZENBERGER STAYED with the Canadiens, he would have won five Stanley Cups in his first six seasons. Instead, he was effectively donated to the Black Hawks in the midst of his rookie season by the Canadiens, who did a solid for the league, which was concerned about the viability of the Hawks franchise. He was outstanding for Chicago, finishing second on the Hawks in scoring while playing just 44 games with the team. He is the only player to win the Calder despite being traded during his rookie season. (Though the very first Calder winner, Carl Voss in 1933, was sold for cash in Year 1.) Litzenberger did plenty of winning later, claiming the Cup with the Hawks in 1961 and three more titles in the three following seasons after being traded to the Maple Leafs. With Calder Cups in 1965 and '66 with AHL Rochester, Litzenberger won six straight pro titles.

TOP 10 CALDER

Little Gump Becomes 5th Ranger To Win Coveted Calder Trophy

Worsley Edges Hannigan By Margin of Five Points

NHL's Top Rookie

Gump Worsley . . . . . Choice of the Voters

ALL STARS . . .

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*The swing is definitely to LABATT'S

THE HOCKEY NEWS, MAY 1953

7. LUC ROBITAILLE

1986-87

WHEN ROBITAILLE ACCEPTED the Calder Trophy at the NHL Awards, his speech was short and sweet. In broken English, he said, "I didn't think I was going to win this award." Neither did anyone else. The Kings thought so much of Robitaille in his draft year that they took a New England high-school player by the name of Tom Glavine 102 picks prior to taking Robitaille. Glavine went on to become a Hall of Fame pitcher, meaning the Kings drafted two Hall of Famers in 1983. (One scout had this assessment of Glavine: "He plays hockey like he pitches – every five games.") At the time, Robitaille was the lowest-drafted player (171st overall) to win the Calder. He was usurped by Evgeni Nabokov in 2001.

CHEW ON THIS DOUBLE BAUBLE

Barrasso was the first NHL goalie to win the Calder and take the Vezina vote in Year 1.

only the Calder Trophy but the Vezina too. Even though the Minnesota North Stars had taken high-schooler Brian Lawton with the No. 1 pick in the 1983 draft, it was still an enormous leap of faith for Buffalo Sabres GM Scotty Bowman not only to choose Barrasso four picks later but make him the team's starting goalie. Barrasso was the first player in NHL history to win the Calder and be voted the Vezina winner in the same season. Seven years later, Ed Belfour did the same thing. Brimsek won both the Calder and the Vezina in 1939 and Tony Esposito did so in 1970, but that was when the Vezina was not voted on but instead automatically went to the goaltender allowing the fewest goals during the regular season.

5. KEN DRYDEN

1971-72

FOUR DECADES AFTER HIS Hall of Fame career ended, Dryden remains one of the greatest goalies in NHL history. But in real time, it was a remarkable story that led to Dryden becoming the rookie of the year in 1971-72. Less than a year before, Dryden became the first player in NHL history to win a major NHL award prior to winning the Calder Trophy when he came out of total obscurity to lead the Canadiens to the Stanley Cup. He also won the Calder while juggling law school at McGill University and beat out Marcel Dionne, Rick Martin and teammate Guy Lafleur for the award. He lost just

GUMP TOOK HIS LUMPS

Worsley won the Calder despite winning just 13 of 50 games with the Rangers in 1952-53.

eight games in his rookie season and finished with a .930 save percentage.

6. TOM BARRASSO

1983-84

BARRASSO WON 22 OF 23 games (he tied the other) in his senior year at Acton-Boxborough High School, and he posted 10 shutouts. But come on, the guy was playing high-school hockey in Massachusetts just months before winning not

8. SERGEI MAKAROV

1989-90

THERE IS NO TRUTH to the legend that Makarov needed the assistance of a walker to go up and get his Calder Trophy in 1990. But the guy was 31 at the time and had spent the previous 11 seasons playing for the juggernaut Red Army team in the former Soviet Union, in what was essentially a pro league. But he met the criteria for the Calder at the time, so it prompted the NHL to change the criteria. From that season forward, the Calder went only to the top first-year player who had not yet reached his 26th birthday by Sept. 15 of his first NHL season. Makarov scored 86 points in his rookie season, a total he was unable to match in any of his following six seasons.

AGE WAS ONLY A NUMBER...

...until Makarov claimed the Calder at 31. After that, the NHL changed the rules for eligibility.

13

HOLY MAKAROV!

CALDER WINNER VOWS TO IMPROVE NEXT YEAR

BY ERIC DUHATSCHEK

Not much was known about Sergei Makarov before he came to Calgary, apart from his lustrous hockey credentials.

The two Olympic gold medals, the seven world championships (he won an eighth in 1990), the Canada Cup title, the six consecutive Soviet league scoring championships. The list of honors could fill Wayne Gretzky's trophy case.

One year later, with one more hardware—the Calder Trophy as the NHL's rookie of the year—on the mantle of his new home in the prestigious community of Edgemont, Alta., Makarov remains something of a mystery man.

This much we learned:

Makarov spent his first season in a luxury townhouse just across the way from Joe Nieuwendyk's place, with his wife Vera and his 10-year-old son Artem, or Tom as they called him in Canada.

He drove a Ford Thunderbird, courtesy of a local automobile dealership. In exchange, he made a couple of personal appearances on behalf of the company that drew huge crowds of autograph seekers. He also filmed a television commercial on their behalf that played like something out of a *Saturday Night Live* sketch.

A dour Makarov stood there in a white trench coat, endorsing his automobile in Russian, with subtitles translating his words for the viewing public. You had to see it to appreciate it.

There were reports that Tom did reasonably well at school—he had undergone three years of English-language education in preparation for the move—but there was no way of confirming it. Even his teammates didn't know for sure.

"The indications I got from Sergei were that Tom did fine," says Nieuwendyk. "The thing that amazed me the most about him was how courageous he was. Here's a kid thrown into a totally different lifestyle, so young, and he seemed to handle it really well. He made friends. He rode his bicycle around everywhere. It looked like he had a ball and fit right in."

The same could be said about his father—some of the time.

One local newspaper asked permission in October to follow Makarov around for "A Day In The Life Of Sergei Makarov" story. They were told to try again in January, that by then, a routine would have been established. January came and went and so did the rest of the season and nobody received permission to do the story.

Unlike the New Jersey Devils' Soviets, who had a translator in Dimitri Lopuchin, the team's strength coach; or the Vancouver Canucks' Soviets, where Igor Larionov spoke passable English from Day 1, Makarov didn't do many interviews.

For the Flames' 40 away games, he was unavailable for comment.

For 40 home games, he would do interviews if he had an especially good night, but only after showering, dressing and chatting up his teammates.

Many deadlines came and went as a result.

Still, there were moments where he demonstrated a dry, sneaky sense of humor that sometimes got lost in the translation.

Once, on a bus heading out of Quebec following a dramatic five-goal rally in the final eight minutes of play, Makarov was asked how Viktor Tikhonov would react to the wild 8-8 tie.

"With Tikhonov? Twenty players get this," he replied, making a slashing motion across his throat.

Then there was the time someone asked the difference between Tikhonov and the Flames' answer to him, Terry Crisp. "Same thing," said Makarov, breezily.

The most enduring example of glasnost came midway through the season when Makarov and coach Terry Crisp met in the latter's office to analyze the first half.

Makarov told Crisp in no uncertain terms he needed more ice time to be effective, proving that one complaint, not enough playing time, is universal.

In the Soviet Union, Makarov played constantly in every situation. The Flames used him on one of two power-play units and not at all to kill penalties. Most of the time the Flames used four lines at even-strength.

While it was known in Calgary Makarov was unhappy about the amount of ice time he received, he kept his other complaints about playing in the NHL to himself—until he returned to the Soviet Union after the Flames were eliminated from the playoffs.

In an interview with the Russian daily newspaper, *Novaye Russkoye Slovo*, Makarov said the NHL-game encourages selfish play.

"In Soviet hockey it is not important

JULY, 1990

Sergei Makarov enjoyed the most success of the Soviets who came to the NHL this season. He had 86 points and won the Calder Trophy.

ARTEMI PANARIN

9. JEFF SKINNER

2010-11

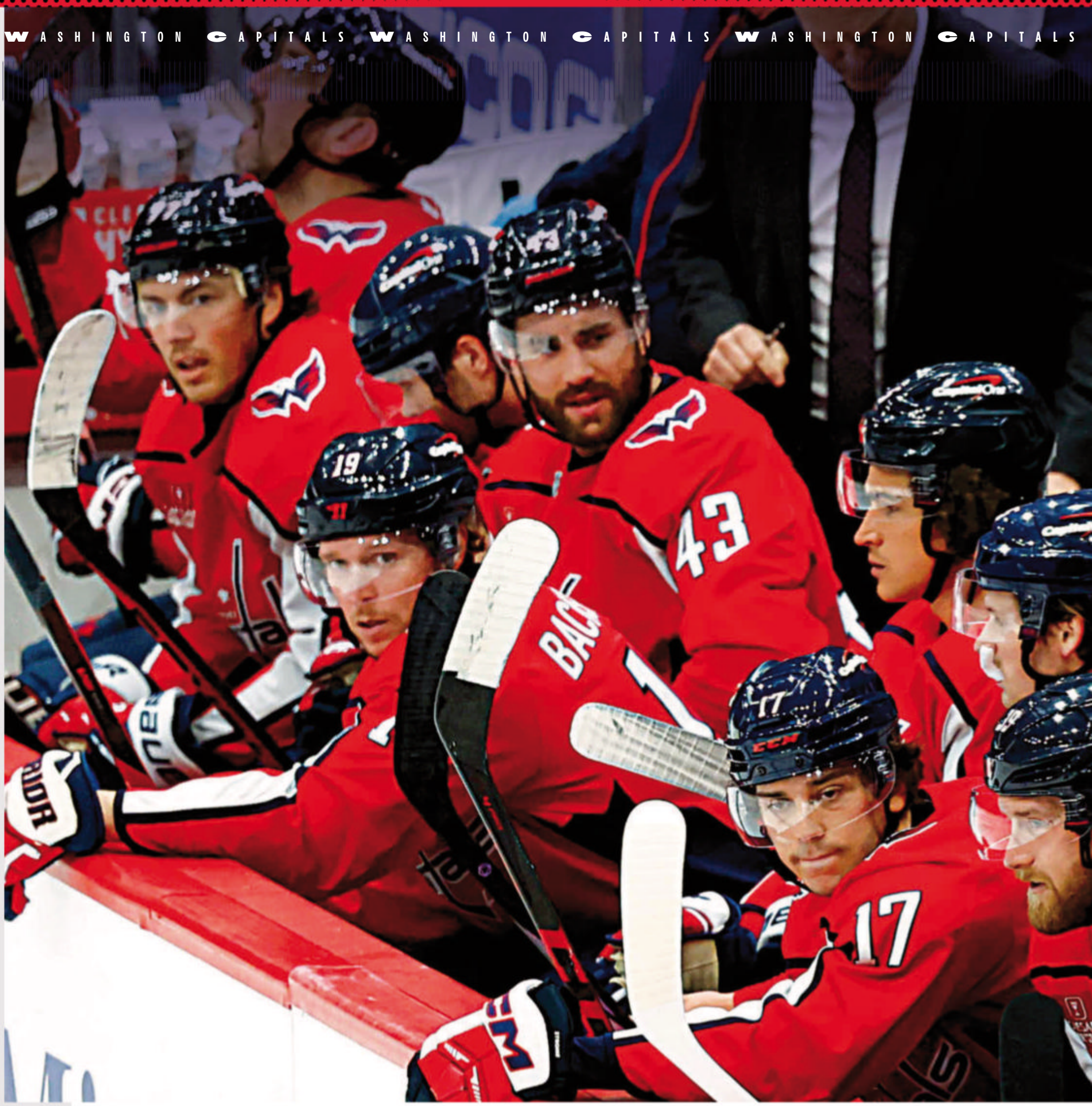
THERE WAS NOTHING particularly distinct about Skinner's Calder season, aside from the fact he stepped into the NHL as an 18-year-old who looked like he was about 12 years old at the time. What makes it so odd is that the Calder is basically the only thing he's ever won at the NHL level. Skinner hasn't had a chance to win much else, because he didn't play a single playoff game in his first 13 seasons in the NHL and almost certainly won't in his 14th. If Skinner stays healthy and doesn't get traded, by season's end, he'll become the first player in NHL history to play 1,000 regular-season games without participating in a playoff game. Lord knows when, or if, he'll ever play in one.

10. ARTEMI PANARIN

2015-16

IT'S NOT AS THOUGH NHL scouts didn't know who Panarin was. After all, they were all there in Buffalo when Panarin scored twice in the 2011 World Junior Championship gold-medal game in the greatest comeback in tournament history (or greatest fold-job, depending on your allegiance). Down 3-0 to Canada heading into the third period, Panarin scored early to get Russia on the board and again with less than five minutes remaining to give them a 4-3 lead in a game they would go on to win 5-3. Despite that, Panarin had to wait four-plus more seasons before being signed by Chicago as a 23-year-old free agent, then scoring 77 points playing alongside Patrick Kane.

PANARIN: BRUCE FEDYCK-USA TODAY SPORTS



CHARACTER

GEOFF BURKE-USA TODAY SPORTS

SPENCER CARBERY COACH

The Capitals' **Spencer Carbery** hasn't shied away from the difficult decisions in his rookie season as an NHL bench boss. And he credits his ECHL beginnings for developing that resolve

BY MIKE TRAIKOS

SPENCER CARBERY, who is the youngest head coach in the NHL, is technically a rookie. But any illusions that the 42-year-old wasn't cut out for the job went out the window early in the season when he made Evgeny Kuznetsov a healthy scratch.

It was a move that wasn't made lightly.

At the time, Kuznetsov was heading into his 700th career game. But with only nine points in his first 19 games and with the Washington Capitals struggling to keep their heads above water in the crowded and competitive Eastern Conference, Carbery needed to send a message – even if it meant embarrassing a veteran who five-and-a-half years earlier had helped the franchise win its first and only Stanley Cup.

"It's s---, but you gotta accept sometimes and trust the process," Kuznetsov said after being a healthy scratch. "I love 'Carbs' so much. I trust what he's doing, and he's trying to help me find my game and get better and help the team because I know that I gotta be better in every area."

Anytime a coach tells a player that he needs a mental reset, there's more going on behind the scenes than a lack of production. This wasn't about performance. It was more about attitude and about setting a standard of expectation. Not just for Kuznetsov, but for the entire roster.

"There's a lot of challenging decisions that come everyday that you have to make as a head coach," Carbery said. "But that one was definitely, from a public perspective, a pretty big statement. You're making a decision on a high-profile player who has accomplished so much in his career that they're not going to play that night. But that comes with the territory as a head coach.

"You have to sometimes make decisions that not everyone is going to agree with. And 'Kuz' definitely did not agree with it. But it was being done for the betterment of the player, from my eyes, and the team."

In other words, Carbery is not looking like the second coming of Bruce Boudreau. He's not a players' coach. The way it's going, he probably has more in common with drill sergeants such as Dale Hunter and Barry Trotz, which is exactly what is needed for a team that is trying to remain competitive while rebuilding.

After all, the Capitals, who missed the playoffs last sea-

SPENCER CARBERY

son after eight consecutive post-season appearances, are in a transition period. They're still being led by Alex Ovechkin, T.J. Oshie and John Carlson. But with Nicklas Backstrom's career basically over and Kuznetsov's name already out there in trade rumors, they need to start thinking about a future that involves players who are under the age of 25.

For now, the man guiding the team toward that uncertain future is a rookie bench boss who "feels like (he's) been coaching for ages."

Carbery never set out to be an NHL head coach. In a lot of ways, he never really sought out to be an NHLer at all.

The scrappy winger from Victoria, B.C., was on his fifth minor-league team in four years when he finally came to the realization that his dream of playing in the AHL – much less the NHL – probably wasn't going to happen. By then, it wasn't really a surprise.

Carbery was never drafted. Having played for a Div. III college, he wasn't even on any NHL team's radar. Once school ended, Carbery got an offer from the Central League and then spent the next several years jumping from team to team in the ECHL, doing whatever he could to stay in the lineup. He was a forward. But with 48 career goals and 638 penalty minutes, the 6-foot-2 enforcer was known more for his fists than his finesse with the puck. And he was getting older.

In the summer of 2010, the 28-year-old Carbery was at a crossroads: he could spend another year toiling in the minors, or he could put his finance degree to good use and get a real job. Initially, he chose the latter. But when nothing materialized, Carbery called back his coach with the ECHL's South Carolina Stingrays and asked if he could return for one more season.

"Sure," said the voice on the other end of the phone. With one caveat.

"Have you ever thought about coaching?" asked Stingrays coach Cail MacLean. "We have an assistant coach role, and I'd like you to consider it."

"No, thanks," Carbery said. "I'd like to play one more year."

"Well, I'm not asking you to play," MacLean said.

It was a not-so-subtle way of telling Carbery that his playing days were officially over. And it ended up being the push that Carbery needed to kick-start his next career. "It's a crazy story," Carbery said. "I literally had zero intentions of coaching and had never thought about it or aspired to do it. I never really even considered it."

Looking back, the signs had been there all along. From MacLean, who is now an assistant coach with the Calgary Flames, to Colorado Avalanche coach Jared Bednar to Ryan Warsofsky, who is an assistant coach with the San Jose Sharks, the Stingrays organization is starting to become known as a coaching factory. "That was the blueprint of the Stingrays organization," Carbery said. "It started with Jason Fitzsimmons. He's now a pro scout with the Washington Capitals. He hired Jared as an assistant coach after he played there and knew what the organization stood for and knew the team. And then Jared hired Cail, who played there. And then Cail hired me. And then I hired Ryan Warsofsky."

From the start, Carbery loved coaching. He had to, because he wasn't doing it for the money. In fact, Carbery earned more money painting houses as a side job

> **"I LOVE 'CARBS' SO MUCH. I TRUST WHAT HE'S DOING, AND HE'S TRYING TO HELP ME FIND MY GAME"**
> **EVGENY KUZNETSOV**

NICK TURCHIARO-USA TODAY SPORTS

WELCOME TO THE BIG-TIME

Carbery's NHL debut came as an assistant in Toronto, where the team is always in the spotlight.

in the summer than he was paid as an ECHL assistant. But what he gave up in salary he more than made up for in experience and opportunity.

"I saw the game through a different lens," he said. "I loved trying to make players better whether it was in their individual game or in our team game, through film and watching games. I loved it from Day 1."

A year later, Carbery was elevated to head coach, a role he stuck with for five seasons. During that span, he guided the Stingrays to five consecutive playoff appearances, reaching the ECHL's Kelly Cup final in 2014-15. From there, he coached one season with the Saginaw Spirit in the OHL, then got hired as an assistant with the AHL's Providence Bruins, followed by three seasons with the Capitals' AHL affiliate in Hershey.

"IT'S A CRAZY STORY. I LITERALLY HAD ZERO INTENTIONS OF COACHING AND HAD NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT IT — SPENCER CARBERY

GEOFF BURKE-USA TODAY SPORTS

Carbery's big coaching break came in 2021, when he joined Sheldon Keefe's staff with the Toronto Maple Leafs. Aside from running one of the best power plays in the NHL, what Carbery gained from the experience was how much every single decision was dissected and scrutinized. "When I was in Toronto, you're all-in, every day, every minute of it," he said. "The team, and all the things we went through there, there's no joking. You eat, sleep and breathe it."

However, ask him where he learned the most and he goes back to his time in the ECHL. Players in the ECHL are typically not destined for greatness. It's a long way from the NHL for skaters, but they still have a love for the game. "High character," he said of the players in the ECHL. "That's the thing I took from Cail and Jared the most is how they treated players and how they coached and how hard they worked. I wanted to make sure the foundation of me as a coach is rooted in that."

The Capitals are a team that is still led by skilled veterans, but if they hope to stay competitive while transitioning from old to young – the kind of thing that the Boston Bruins have made look easy – it will be because of their work ethic and character.

That's ultimately why Kuznetsov was benched. It wasn't to necessarily spark him to become a better player. Rather, it was to send a message to the likes of Aliaksei Protas, Connor McMichael and Ivan Miroshnichenko, who weren't even drafted when the Capitals won the Cup back in 2018.

"It's a unique situation," Carbery said. "We have that blend of veteran players and younger players who are trying to learn how to win and trying to learn how to be effective NHL players in a winning environment. And there's no question it's a challenge in trying to balance the two while also trying to win every night.

"But, and I always say this to guys on the team, I often have to make difficult decisions, and I'll be the first one to say that they're not always right. Difficult decisions are well thought out and calculated. It's not like I'm shooting from the hip." H

TRADE DEADLINE

VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

ACQUIRE:
> Mark Stone
> Tobias Lindberg

OTTAWA SENATORS

ACQUIRE:
Erik Brannstrom <
Oscar Lindberg <
2020 second-round pick (Egor Sokolov) <

THE MAX PACIORETTY deal was the first blockbuster trade in Golden Knights history. But ultimately, acquiring the Canadiens captain was just the *amuse-bouche*. Because if any trade made clear Vegas' intention to become more than a feel-good expansion story, it was stepping up to the plate and taking the biggest swing at the 2019 trade deadline. The target? Ottawa Senators alternate captain Mark Stone.

Ottawa was in the midst of a full-fledged fire sale, having started the season by sending captain Erik Karlsson packing and later offloading Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel. Stone was the final domino to fall. A pending UFA, Stone had established himself as one of the NHL's top two-way talents and was in the midst of a career-best season.

Vegas quickly ponied up to ensure its new top-line prize – and eventual captain – stayed put, signing Stone to an eight-year, $76-million extension on March 8, 2019. And while he made an instant impact, it wasn't until recently the bow was put on the deal. Stone, who missed much of 2022-23 after back surgery, returned in time for the 2023 playoffs and played the second-most post-season minutes among Vegas forwards as the team stormed to its first Stanley Cup title. Stone notched a hat trick in the Cup-clinching game to cap an 11-goal, 24-point playoff performance with an iconic moment.

In hindsight, that Vegas got Stone for Erik Brannstrom, Oscar Lindberg and a second-round pick seems laughable. But Brannstrom, drafted 15th overall in 2017, was seen as a Grade A prospect and dynamic puck-moving defenseman. He was considered a future star and ranked 24th in THN's Future Watch in 2018 and 11th in 2019. While Brannstrom hasn't become the first-pairing defender the Sens hoped for, he's been a good hand. However, that doesn't ease the pain of Stone's departure.

ST. LOUIS BLUES

ACQUIRE:
> Ryan Miller
> Steve Ott

BUFFALO SABRES

ACQUIRE:
Jaroslav Halak <
Chris Stewart <
William Carrier <
2015 first-round pick (to Winnipeg) <
2016 third-round pick (to Florida) <

NABBING PENDING UFA Ryan Miller was seen as a massive get for the Blues. Miller was only four years removed from winning the Vezina and was among the NHL's few elite stoppers. But it was an odd move, too, as Halak and partner Brian Elliott had similar numbers to Miller. And the deal backfired almost instantly. Miller had a pedestrian .903 save percentage and 10-8-1 record in 19 regular-season games before the Chicago Blackhawks aerated him in the opening round of the 2014 playoffs. His .897 SP was central to the Blues' first-round exit. Miller then departed for Vancouver as a free agent.

Buffalo leveraged its assets well, swapping Halak and a 2015 third-rounder days later for Michal Neuvirth and Rostislav Klesla. The 2015 first-round pick helped land Evander Kane from Winnipeg, and Stewart was later moved for the pick that became Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

STONE: DAN HAMILTON-USA TODAY SPORTS; BRANNSTROM: MARC DESROSIERS-USA TODAY SPORTS; MILLER: JEROME MIRON-USA TODAY SPORTS

REWIND XX

BY JARED CLINTON

WILLIAMS: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; LANG: JAMES GUILLORY-USA TODAY SPORTS; CHELIOS: LOU CAPOZZOLA-USA TODAY NETWORK

LOS ANGELES KINGS

ACQUIRE:
> Justin Williams

CAROLINA HURRICANES

ACQUIRE:
Patrick O'Sullivan <
2009 second-round pick (Brian Dumoulin) <

JUSTIN WILLIAMS BEGAN his tenure in Carolina with consecutive 30-goal seasons, but injuries, a subsequent downturn in production and a December 2008 coaching change put his spot on the Canes in peril.

But a change of scenery can breathe new life into a player. Flipped to the Kings, Williams began on a similarly dour pace before ticking up to start 2009-10. Then, everything clicked. He quickly became a focal point of the Kings' forward group, eventually helping the team win the 2012 Stanley Cup. He'd also win the 2014 Conn Smythe Trophy as L.A. capped off its mini-dynasty.

O'Sullivan was shipped to Edmonton for Erik Cole – who helped the Hurricanes to an Eastern Conference final appearance – and a fifth-round pick. Dumoulin, taken with the second-round pick, was traded to Pittsburgh before playing a single game for Carolina.

DETROIT RED WINGS

ACQUIRE:
> Robert Lang

WASHINGTON CAPITALS

ACQUIRE:
Tomas Fleischmann <
2004 first-round pick (Mike Green) <
2006 fourth-round pick (Luke Lynes) <

CAN THERE BE any greater statement of intent than the top team in the league adding the league's leading scorer? Because that's what happened here. Detroit was sitting atop the NHL with 36 wins, while Lang's 74 points tied him with Martin St-Louis in the Art Ross Trophy race.

Lang came up short of the Art Ross (he missed time due to injury), but he was excellent in the playoffs. Detroit's pursuit of the Cup was cut short, though, by Calgary and a red-hot Miikka Kiprusoff, who stole the second-round matchup. Lang remained a steady veteran contributor in Detroit over the next two seasons.

On the other side, Fleischmann was a serviceable second-line talent during Washington's early Ovechkin-era rise, and Mike Green was emblematic of those high-flying Capitals, becoming arguably the purest offensive blueliner of the aughts.

DETROIT RED WINGS

ACQUIRE:
> Chris Chelios

CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

ACQUIRE:
Anders Eriksson <
1999 first-round pick (Steve McCarthy) <
2001 first-round pick (Adam Munro) <

IN DIRE NEED of a reset, the Blackhawks held a fire sale to close out the millennium. Chicago had already offloaded Jeff Hackett, Eric Weinrich and a coterie of young talent, including Daniel Cleary and Ethan Moreau, by the time the final day of trade business arrived. But GM Bob Murray's roster-gutting wasn't complete until Chris Chelios was jettisoned to the rival Red Wings.

The deal itself followed a dispute between Chelios and the franchise over whether the 37-year-old had much tread left on the tires. He responded by finishing sixth in Norris Trophy voting the following season, then came second two seasons later and remained a Red Wing for nearly a decade. When he departed Detroit in 2008-09, Chelios, then 47, had added a pair of Stanley Cups to his resume and cemented his legacy as one of the greatest defensemen in league history.

CHRIS TANEV

NHL

READY FOR THE FIRE SALE

With a plethora of pending UFAs, the Flames are the main focus leading up to the NHL's March 8 trade deadline **BY JARED CLINTON**

BACK IN HIS TIME at Clarkson University, Craig Conroy was a management major. That's fitting enough given his career arc, which has seen him transition seamlessly from his 1,000-game NHL job into front-office duty, eventually rising into the big chair when he was named Calgary Flames GM in May.

But a quality education is nothing without a bit of diversification, and it seems Conroy managed to find time during his college days to learn that oft-repeated aphorism about history: those who don't learn from it are destined to repeat it. The history, in this instance, isn't even all that ancient. It was only 2022 when Conroy, then an assistant GM in Calgary, had front-row seats to the saga surrounding Johnny Gaudreau, who remained a Flame through that season's trade deadline despite hurtling toward unrestricted free agency.

It wasn't an altogether senseless decision – the Flames were in the division-title hunt, and Gaudreau was playing the best hockey of his life. But after Calgary's playoff run ended and as free agency appeared on the horizon, it was first a concern and later evident Gaudreau wouldn't be sticking around.

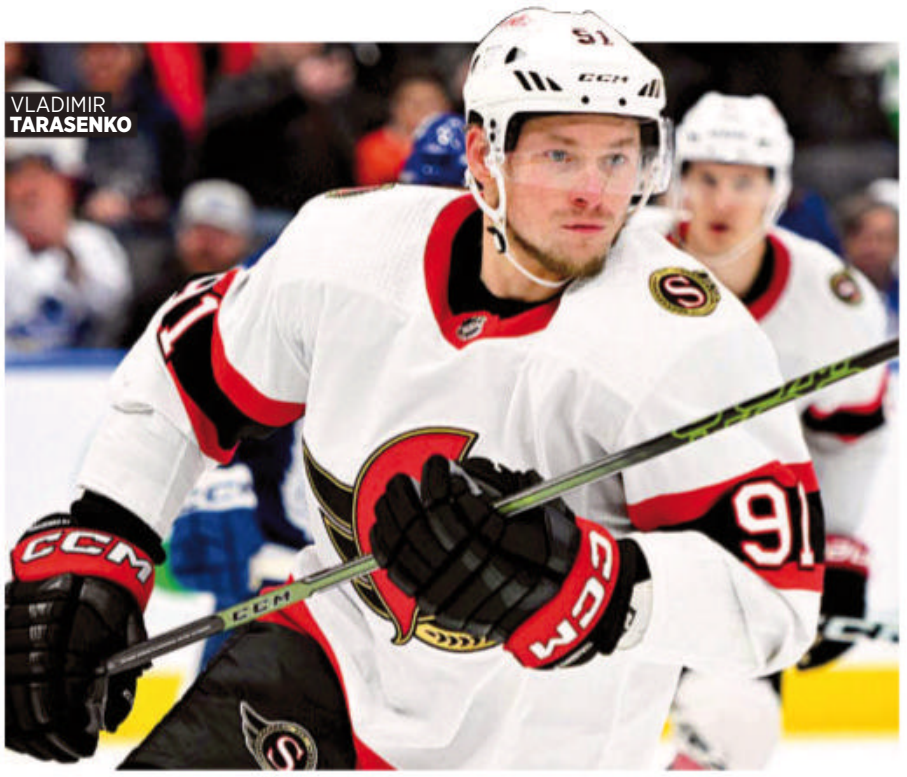
We bring this up not to open old wounds but because it's relevant again. Upon Conroy's elevation to the top job in Calgary, it was evident the top items on his to-do list were new deals with pending UFAs Mikael Backlund, Elias Lindholm and Noah Hanifin. Those plans changed when the Flames stumbled out of the blocks. While Backlund was re-signed – and handed the captaincy – negotiations with Lindholm and Hanifin were scuppered amid a 2-6-1 October that left Calgary ahead of only the intentionally dreadful San Jose Sharks in the standings.

Unfortunately for the Flames, fighting their way into the wild-card race had, as of mid-January, done little to reignite talks. Thus, while the circumstances aren't identical, Conroy has had reason to think back on Gaudreau's departure and his team's situation with the deadline approaching.

On one hand, Conroy can give his club a puncher's chance, retain Lindholm and Hanifin (let's not forget about Chris Tanev, either) and hope a playoff berth leads to a Stanley Cup run. This, of course, leaves Conroy open to the same fate as his predecessor, who watched talented UFAs walk without so much as future considerations in return. Which leaves Conroy contemplating Door No. 2: trading the pending UFAs for the best possible return, aiming to redesign a better Flames outfit on the fly.

It is Conroy's conundrum, no question, which holds the most intrigue as the deadline approaches. Whether he offloads one, two or all three of his notable UFAs-to-be will send a corresponding ripple through the league's trade waters, a pool that is shallower than in recent years but not without its big fish. And buyers shouldn't

SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS


VLADIMIR TARASENKO

have to cast across the Canadian border to hook a handful of the most prized targets, either.

Amid expectations of a meaningful step forward, Ottawa face-planting to the bottom of the Atlantic Division has opened the door for off-season signing Vladimir Tarasenko's exit. As a middle-six scorer and power-play specialist, he'll draw attention from offense-starved clubs. The Senators are certain to move Dominik Kubalik, too. At half of Tarasenko's $5-million cap hit, Kubalik is a bargain-bin option for clubs on a shoestring budget.

Meanwhile, despite hovering around the Eastern Conference playoff bubble into the new year, Montreal's best course of action will be to collect all picks and prospects available in support of the multi-year rebuild. The resurgent Sean Monahan will draw significant attention, as will veteran goalie Jake Allen, who has brought stability to the Canadiens' crease but isn't part of the long-term plan. With a few playoff-bound clubs facing goaltending quandaries, Allen will have suitors.

Clubs missing out on Allen won't be without goaltending options, however. Columbus' Elvis Merzlikins and the team reportedly agreed that a "new scenario" would be best for both parties.

And there is one big swing to be taken at Anaheim starter John Gibson. His name has flitted around the rumor mill all season. That he's locked in for three more seasons at a $6.4-million cap hit would mean an improved trade haul for the Ducks, especially if salary retention is on the table.

Even in the event he moves, though, there exists the possibility Gibson isn't the biggest name dealt at the deadline, especially if Jake Guentzel and the Pittsburgh Penguins enter March at a contract stalemate. A two-time 40-goal scorer and Sidney Crosby's longtime wingman, Guentzel might be the only game-breaking offensive talent available. The only difficulty is that, as the Penguins consider their post-Crosby future, Pittsburgh GM Kyle Dubas will want nothing less than a princely sum in return.

On the following pages, we give you the scoop on what to expect as the NHL's March 8 trade deadline approaches.

BUYER: These teams believe they just need a final piece to win it all and are willing to part with futures to get it.

SELLER: It's time to look to next year and beyond. These squads are looking to trade vets for picks and prospects.

IN LIMBO: These clubs could either be buyers or sellers, are happy to stand pat or don't have the assets to make a significant splash.

DAN HAMILTON-USA TODAY SPORTS

THN TRADE BAIT

> POWER RANKINGS

These are the top 20 NHLers to watch in the weeks before the trade deadline, with serious consideration given to the likelihood they'll be dealt

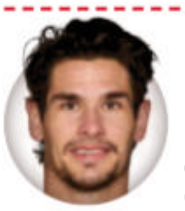
1. CHRIS TANEV
D, CALGARY
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

2. ELIAS LINDHOLM
C, CALGARY
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

3. VLADIMIR TARASENKO
RW, OTTAWA
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

4. NOAH HANIFIN
D, CALGARY
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

5. SEAN WALKER
D, PHILADELPHIA
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA



6. SEAN MONAHAN
C, MONTREAL
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

7. ANTHONY DUCLAIR
LW, SAN JOSE
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

8. JAKE ALLEN
G, MONTREAL
CONTRACT: $3.85M TO 2025

9. ADAM HENRIQUE
C, ANAHEIM
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

10. DOMINIK KUBALIK
LW, OTTAWA
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

11. ILYA LYUBUSHKIN
D, ANAHEIM
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

12. JOHN GIBSON
G, ANAHEIM
CONTRACT: $6.4M TO 2027

13. TYLER JOHNSON
LW, CHICAGO
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

14. TONY DEANGELO
D, CAROLINA
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

15. TYSON BARRIE
D, NASHVILLE
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

16. MATT DUMBA
D, ARIZONA
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

17. ZACH BOGOSIAN
D, MINNESOTA
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

18. MIKE HOFFMAN
LW, SAN JOSE
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

19. JASON ZUCKER
LW, ARIZONA
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

20. JAKE GUENTZEL
LW, PITTSBURGH
CONTRACT: 2024 UFA

ATLANTIC DIVISION

TRADE DEADLINE PREVIEW

BY NICK EMANUELLI

BOSTON BRUINS

THE MACHINE JUST KEEPS on chugging in Boston. Despite losing captain and future Hall of Fame center Patrice Bergeron and second-line center David Krejci to retirement last summer, the Bruins were once again Presidents' Trophy contenders at the season's halfway point.

While Charlie Coyle and Pavel Zacha have filled in admirably in the top-six center roles vacated by Bergeron and Krejci, another proven top-line pivot would be an attractive addition. Similarly, while James van Riemsdyk (27 points in 40 games) has considerably outperformed his $1-million AAV, another middle-six winger would be nice. So, too, would a depth defenseman.

How big is GM Don Sweeney willing to go? Pending UFA Elias Lindholm, a fantastic two-way center, is a perfect fit. The problem is, with a shallow prospect pool and no picks until the fourth round of the 2024 draft, Boston would have to part with a blue-chipper like **FABIAN LYSELL** to land a big fish. The Bruins are also tight against the salary cap, so they'd either need to pay extra for salary retention or move out a contract to make things work. Another pending UFA, Sean Monahan, with his $1.985-million cap hit, is a more cost-effective option at center.

BUFFALO SABRES

PERHAPS NO TEAM HAS had a more bitterly disappointing first half than the Sabres, who entered 2023-24 hoping to end their 12-season playoff drought. Instead, the team was hovering just below .500. Some of that is due to poor puck luck and poor goaltending; both have contributed to the Sabres having a .987 PDO, seventh-worst in the NHL. Missing top-line center Tage Thompson for 10 games didn't help, either. Still, a regression from last season's point pace is unquestionably tough to swallow.

Buffalo, however, goes into the deadline in limbo, as it doesn't have much to sell – at least not at the deadline. If GM Kevyn Adams wants to make a "roster shakeup" move, he'd be better served waiting until the summer.

Pending UFA blueliner **ERIK JOHNSON**, 35, may be Adams' best piece to move before March 8. Johnson is averaging a career-low 14:11 in ice time, but he won a Stanley Cup with Colorado in 2022 and is a veteran of 55 career playoff games. GMs always value that experience. Right winger Victor Olofsson is another pending UFA, but he's having the worst year of his six-season NHL career and carries a $4.75-million cap hit. Buffalo would need to retain salary to get much for him.

DETROIT RED WINGS

THE RED WINGS WERE well within playoff contention, and while GM Steve Yzerman probably isn't quite ready to send off a bunch of futures in pursuit of a big deadline rental just yet, he won't want to impede that playoff pursuit, either.

If Detroit is still in a playoff spot come March, a defenseman who could be part of Detroit's long-term future would be attractive. While Simon Edvinsson, THN's No. 2-ranked prospect in Future Watch 2023, is on the way, Detroit could use an upgrade on the left side. Ottawa's Jakob Chychrun or Calgary's Noah Hanifin fit the bill, though the latter would need a contract extension. A goalie to pair with the red-hot Alex Lyon would also be nice, as neither Ville Husso nor James Reimer has been reliable.

Should the Red Wings experience a sudden downturn, Yzerman could always be a last-minute seller. David Perron and Daniel Sprong both provide scoring juice and could be middle-six wingers on a contender. Offensive blueliner **SHAYNE GOSTISBEHERE** was on a 57-point pace at mid-season and could entice a team looking for an injection of scoring from the back end. Moving the pending UFA would also free up a spot for Edvinsson.

FLORIDA PANTHERS

THE DEFENDING EASTERN Conference champions would have been forgiven for scuffling to start 2023-24. Instead, despite being without linchpin blueliners Aaron Ekblad and Brandon Montour for 17 and 16 games, the Cats were within shouting distance of the Atlantic Division lead.

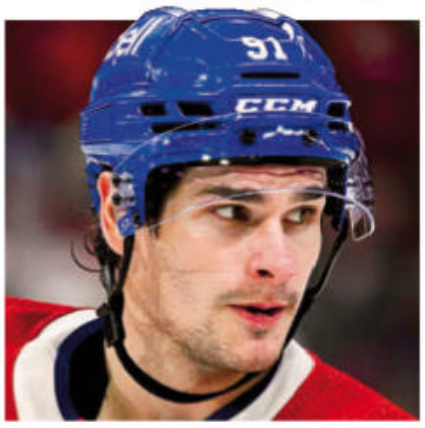
The Panthers don't want for much at the moment. But with several pending UFAs and less-than-unlimited cap dollars to spend to retain them, Florida should still be firmly on the "buy" side come March 8. Florida wouldn't part with a blue-chipper like Mackie Samoskevich but could deal from its glut of blueline prospects. **MICHAEL BENNING** or Evan Nause are solid B-listers.

If Florida could use any help, it would be in the form of a scorer. Despite the Cats generating the second-best rate of expected goals in the NHL (all strengths), the team was middle-of-the-pack in goals per game. Even with Sam Reinhart shooting at a gaudy 27.7 percent, Florida was scoring on just 9.2 percent of shots. Of the six teams with lower shooting percentages, only Philadelphia was in a playoff spot. A swing for the fences would be Vladimir Tarasenko. Lower-cost options include Anthony Duclair, Mike Hoffman (both former Panthers) and Dominik Kubalik.

LYSELL: ERIC CANHA-USA TODAY SPORTS; JOHNSON: JAMES GUILLORY-USA TODAY SPORTS; GOSTISBEHERE: DAVID KIROUAC-USA TODAY SPORTS; BENNING: CHA

MONTREAL CANADIENS

FOR SALE



WHILE MONTREAL HAS progressed enough in its rebuild to no longer be in sell-everything mode, GM Kent Hughes could still set the trade dominoes in motion ahead of the March 8 deadline.

Pending UFA **SEAN MONAHAN** still has some scoring touch and is a good option for a gotta-have-it faceoff. The center's 54.8-percent win rate over the past three seasons is 23rd among the 129 NHLers to take at least 1,000 draws in that span. His $1.985-million cap hit won't be hard to work with, especially if Montreal is willing to retain salary (though the Habs have just one of three retention slots left).

Seeing as many contenders have crease questions, goalie Jake Allen, who has one year left at $3.85 million, will also draw interest. The 33-year-old's stats (3.49 goals-against average, .901 save percentage in 15 games) don't jump off the page, but Allen has done admirably considering his workload. Among the 64 NHL stoppers to play at least 500 minutes by mid-January, no goalie faced more expected goals against per hour, and only 12 faced more frequent high-danger shots. Allen did his best work as part of a tandem in St. Louis and backed up Jordan Binnington on the Blues' run to the 2019 Cup.

OTTAWA SENATORS

FOR SALE

THE SENATORS CAME INTO 2023-24 cautiously optimistic they could challenge for their first playoff spot since coming a goal shy of reaching the 2017 Stanley Cup final. Instead, Ottawa was a bottom-five team as of mid-January, and both GM Pierre Dorion and coach D.J. Smith were dismissed before the calendar turned over.

However, recently installed GM Steve Staios has some attractive pieces to sell. Pending UFA **VLADIMIR TARASENKO**, pacing for 24 goals and 63 points, is one of the biggest fish available. His $5-million ticket and no-trade clause complicate things, but his Cup experience and proven scoring touch – he's a six-time 30-goal scorer – are assets. Erik Brannstrom, 24, may also shake loose. He is an RFA at season's end. Ottawa has a glut of left-shot 'D,' and Brannstrom has been a creditable producer despite limited minutes and PP time. Left winger Dominik Kubalik, 28, is a more cost-effective goal-scoring option.

The Sens haven't picked in the first round since taking Tyler Boucher 10th overall in 2021. While they own two first-rounders in 2024, more draft capital would help bolster a prospect pool without a game-changing talent – especially as Ottawa must forfeit a first-rounder in one of the next three drafts.

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

TAMPA BAY GM JULIEN BriseBois has made several splashes at the deadline in the past few seasons. The dividends are obvious – the second (2020) and third (2021) Stanley Cups in club history, plus another Cup final appearance (2022).

But all that comes at a cost, and it's left the Bolts almost wholly bereft of futures with which to shop. The Lightning have just one pick (a third) in the first four rounds of the 2024 draft, and they have already traded their 2025 first. They've also only made four top-100 picks in the past three drafts combined, leaving them with a thimble-deep prospect pool, though **JACK FINLEY** and Jack Thompson are solid B-listers if BriseBois sees something he really likes.

When you marry the lack of assets with the Bolts' first-half performance – though they were in a tenuous playoff spot as of mid-January, their plus-one goal differential was the worst of any playoff team – this seems like a year for BriseBois to stand pat. But don't expect the Bolts to sell. The only really enticing UFA is captain Steven Stamkos, 33, and BriseBois said the center won't be traded.

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

IT'S HARD TO WRITE off a team with the best scorer on the planet – not to mention the NHL's fourth-best record since 2021-22. But the Leafs have some big holes to fill and limited futures with which to fill them. A young NHLer like **NICK ROBERTSON** or a blue-chip prospect like Topi Niemela could hold sway, but is now the right time to use that capital?

The list of desires for Toronto is pretty boilerplate for any contender: a right-shot defenseman, a middle-six forward (Anthony Duclair, Sean Monahan) and a 1B goalie (Marc-Andre Fleury, Jake Allen). At least they already added some snarl in the summer (Max Domi, Tyler Bertuzzi, Ryan Reaves).

Should the Leafs have a good February and choose to buy big, priority No. 1 should be pending UFA Chris Tanev. He is one of the NHL's premier defense-minded blueliners and would fit perfectly on the Leafs' top pair with Morgan Rielly. But many teams will be in pursuit, and the price may be too rich for GM Brad Treliving's blood. Philadelphia's Sean Walker or Nashville's Dante Fabbro also move the needle. Taking care of that would diminish the pressure on finding goaltending help. Joseph Woll and Martin Jones had good numbers, albeit in limited minutes, despite the Leafs surrendering the ninth-most expected goals against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5.

MONAHAN: DAVID KIROUAC-USA TODAY SPORTS; TARASENKO: BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS; FINLEY: SYRACUSE CRUNCH; ROBERTSON: NICK TURCHIARO-USA TODAY

METRO DIVISION

TRADE DEADLINE PREVIEW

BY RYAN KENNEDY

CAROLINA HURRICANES

WHILE IT TOOK SOME time for the Hurricanes to find their footing, the team finished the first half starting to look like the contender we expected them to be. But one key component to success was still very much up in the air: goaltending. The two veterans who have been feature players for the past few seasons, Frederik Andersen and **ANTTI RAANTA**, have been either hurt, bad or both. Raanta was even waived at one point. The goalie of the future, Pyotr Kochetkov, had the best save percentage of the three, but even that was a low bar – he was .900 flat as of mid-January.

Should the Canes hope to bring a second parade to Raleigh, it wouldn't be silly to bring in another veteran option in net. Could they pry Jacob Markstrom out of Calgary? Or would they take a risk on San Jose's Kaapo Kahkonen to thrive with a better defense in front of him? Raanta could always go the other way, as he's on an expiring contract anyway.

Otherwise, the Canes have all the elements when it comes to skaters. The return of Andrei Svechnikov from injury gave Carolina a game-breaker and the team's only point-per-gamer besides star center Sebastian Aho.

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

THE BLUE JACKETS, WHO sit dead-last in the Metro Division, aren't going anywhere this season. But one Jacket was pretty vocal that he'd be up for a change of scenery. Starting netminder **ELVIS MERZLIKINS** sent the rumor mill into overdrive in January when he told media he wasn't happy with a recent benching and that he'd prefer a new scenario to being a third-stringer. While Merzlikins has OK numbers for Columbus, he's not exactly pounding down the door to the Vezina Trophy.

Having said that, a team that believes in the 6-foot-3 Latvian could find their own starting netminder if the deal is right. It's hard to see a lot of fits thanks to his long-term contract, which features a $5.4-million cap hit through 2026-27, but a team like San Jose could use a long-term solution, and a team like New Jersey could use a short-term solution.

The Blue Jackets don't hold many cards otherwise, which is to be expected from a team at the bottom of the standings. What they do have is a raft of RFAs who represent the future of the franchise. Forwards such as Kent Johnson, Yegor Chinakhov, Kirill Marchenko and Cole Sillinger are among the significant names in need of new pacts this summer.

NEW JERSEY DEVILS

INJURIES HAVE TRULY MUDDIED the waters in Newark, where the Devils have gone from a pre-season darling to a middle-of-the-road dud so far. Jack Hughes, Dougie Hamilton, Timo Meier and Jonas Siegenthaler all missed varying amounts of time in the first half, making it hard to get an accurate read on what this edition of the Devils is truly capable of.

Do they need another goaltender? Keeping pucks out of the net has been a problem – but getting only 20 games of Hamilton will do that. If New Jersey feels confident in what they are at 100 percent, then yes, another netminder would be nice. But so would some depth up front, just to really hammer the point home. Anthony Duclair from San Jose would be a nice pickup, as would other pending UFAs Dominik Kubalik from Ottawa or Tyler Johnson from Chicago.

The team does still have a nice pipeline of prospects and youngsters to trade away if necessary. The question is just one of security: how sure are they that they're a playoff team this year? If they go for it, the Devils have a glut of right-shot D-men to deal, too: veteran **COLIN MILLER**, for example.

NEW YORK ISLANDERS

SURPRISINGLY POROUS TEAM defense put the Islanders in a bad spot at the midway mark. And in such a competitive division, you couldn't fault GM Lou Lamoriello if he decides to be a seller at the trade deadline. Having said that, this is not a team in rebuild mode, with many top skaters locked into long-term contracts and in possession of no-trade clauses. Pending UFAs such as Cal Clutterbuck and Matt Martin would be great adds for a contender looking for heavy playoff-style energy guys, but at the same time, both players are so synonymous with the Islanders that it's hard picturing them leaving at this point.

Should New York want to at least get something done, defenseman **MIKE REILLY** is an option as a rental going out. He's a pending UFA and a puck-mover on a cheap deal. He would be easy to fit under anyone's cap. Of course, the return wouldn't be substantial, but at least the Islanders could add a draft pick to their coffers. Right now, they're slated to pick just five times in 2024.

Had New York been healthier on the back end, perhaps the situation wouldn't look so stark right now, and it's certainly disappointing for a franchise that went big in getting Bo Horvat last year. But reality shows a tough road to the post-season.

RAANTA: BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS; MERZLIKINS: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; MILLER: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; REILLY: BRAD PENNER-USA TODAY SPORTS

NEW YORK RANGERS

THE RANGERS ARE UP tight against the salary cap – but when you're playing as well as they are, that tends to be less of a concern. New York has been one of the best teams in the NHL all season, and GM Chris Drury has assembled a deep, versatile roster with weapons at every position.

While the Rangers made a splash before last year's deadline in adding Patrick Kane and Vladimir Tarasenko, the result was still a first-round loss to rival New Jersey – and both rentals moved on in the summer. It's hard to imagine New York making too many moves at this year's deadline, and if Drury does get involved, it will likely be a minor tweak or two. You can never have too much depth in the postseason, and someone like Tyler Johnson, with his two Cup rings from his days in Tampa, would make sense.

The return of Filip Chytil from an upper-body injury would give the Rangers excellent depth down the middle, but it's still unforeseen if and when the Czech center will return this season. Drury has his next three first-round picks at his disposal if he wants to make a deal, or prospects **BRENNAN OTHMANN** or Gabe Perreault could be offered up in a blockbuster.

PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

THE FLYERS HAVE BEEN one of the great stories of the first half, punching well above their weight and hanging around the top of the division. Much of the credit can be given to the team's new culture and the return of veterans Sean Couturier and Cam Atkinson. So how do you reward a roster that has earned a treat?

If there's one thing that Philadelphia could use, it's more offensive punch. The power play has been a struggle – it's the worst in the league – and the overall attack is bottom-tier. One obvious candidate to help in that regard would be San Jose's Mike Hoffman, who has made a career as a power-play specialist. But could coach John Tortorella look past the defensive flaws in Hoffman's game? It's a fair question.

GM Daniel Briere already made a big splash when he landed defenseman Jamie Drysdale – who quickly became a Tortorella favorite – from Anaheim in exchange for prospect Cutter Gauthier, so there isn't a lot of urgency to make another major move. But Drysdale's arrival does give the Flyers a glut of blueliners, and if Briere wanted to make another swap, a talent such as **EGOR ZAMULA** would be pretty enticing to other franchises. Cap space is at a premium, however.

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

THE DRIVE FOR ANOTHER Stanley Cup during the Sidney Crosby era is somewhat alive, and based on how new GM Kyle Dubas kicked off his tenure – with the big-time acquisition of Erik Karlsson – the Penguins won't be rebuilding just yet. But it's been an absolute roller coaster of a season for Pittsburgh, and, eventually, Dubas and company will have to decide if they have the horses to be a playoff team, let alone a contender.

The biggest decision will surround **JAKE GUENTZEL**, the star left winger who always shows up in the playoffs. Guentzel is a lifelong Penguin, but he's also a pending UFA. The rumor mill has already been churning, linking him to Vancouver specifically. And there's a lot of personnel crossover between the two teams, so it does make sense.

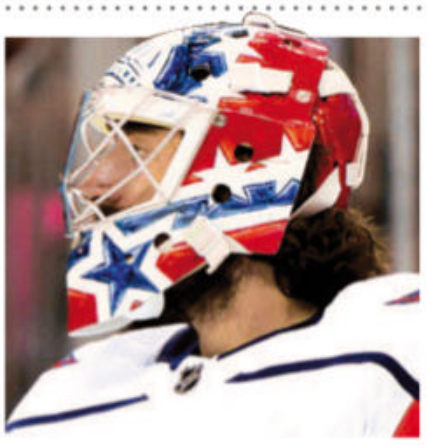
The Pens have been famously draft-averse the past decade, trading away picks and prospects they selected in the first round. The logic was to maximize their championship window, and for much of that span, it totally made sense. But the Penguins haven't been a real threat in years, and the cupboard needs restocking. Guentzel would net a first-rounder and more – and right now the Pens only have one pick (a second-rounder) in the top 100 for 2024.

WASHINGTON CAPITALS

MUCH LIKE THEIR ARCHRIVALS in Pittsburgh, the Capitals find themselves in a quandary: do they go for another Stanley Cup, or do they accept it's time to move on from a vaunted core and retool? Obviously, the Caps aren't going to trade Alex Ovechkin, but at the least, they could *not* go for it at the deadline and maybe even trade away a plum asset for futures.

When the Caps draft, they often make great picks – the problem has been that they haven't picked very often in the past decade. Washington has a nice stable of netminders, and based on Charlie Lindgren's breakout, they could part with **HUNTER SHEPARD** if someone is looking for depth at the position.

In terms of additions, the Capitals got themselves a freebie when they signed free-agent defenseman Ethan Bear right after Christmas. Yes, there are still some injury woes surrounding the Capitals, but Max Pacioretty played his first games for the team in January, so that was a positive development.



GM Brian MacLellan has given himself some wiggle room under the cap, so if he does decide to go all-in with this group, he could add another body. Strangely enough, Ovechkin's team was one of the least lethal offenses in the NHL through the first half.

OTHMANN: JESSICA ALCHEH-USA TODAY SPORTS; GUENTZEL: CHARLES LECLAIRE-USA TODAY SPORTS; SHEPARD: JOHN JONES-USA TODAY SPORTS; ZAMULA: JOHN GELIEBTER-USA TODAY SPORTS

CENTRAL DIVISION

TRADE DEADLINE PREVIEW

BY JARED CLINTON

ARIZONA COYOTES

IF THE COYOTES REMAIN in position to battle for their second playoff berth since 2013, they cannot and should not pass up the opportunity. But with the team's horde of pending UFAs, their contract situations seem primed for leveraging into picks and prospects, mainly because most of those on expiring deals haven't exactly been impact players.

The most intriguing among those Arizona could offload are defenseman **MATT DUMBA** and left winger Jason Zucker. In Dumba's case, his production has continued to plummet, but his physicality and shot-blocking are traits that contenders covet at this time of year. Zucker, meanwhile, is in the midst of one of his weakest offensive seasons, but he's been known to be a streaky scorer. As far as low-risk, potentially high-reward, bottom-six additions are concerned, teams could do much worse. D-men Troy Stecher and Travis Dermott will also draw interest.

But what GM Bill Armstrong must consider is the message it sends to his young players if the Coyotes begin shedding talent amid a playoff push. Arizona's approach could prove especially cautious – and Armstrong could make his ultimate decision as late as the pre-deadline hours.

CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

THE TRULY DREADFUL 2023-24 Blackhawks present us with a paradox: can a team be considered a seller if it does not possess anything a contending team – or even a bubble club – will seriously consider buying?

While there are a few players who will make their way to trade-shaped life rafts and be allowed to abandon Chicago's sinking ship before the deadline, the reality for Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson is that every best-laid plan he might have had blew up in his face in dramatic fashion. Taylor Hall and Corey Perry were brought aboard last summer to play alongside rookie sensation Connor Bedard, teach the kid a thing or two and exit to the highest bidder at the deadline. This was, of course, before Hall sustained a season-ending injury and an off-ice incident led to Perry's contract termination.

That leaves the Blackhawks attempting to fetch picks or mid-level prospects in exchange for veteran forwards **TYLER JOHNSON** and Colin Blackwell. Mid-season acquisition Anthony Beauvillier is a potential trade chip, too. Each is a UFA at season's end. Almost all of them, though, will be sought as role players or Plan C options by contenders who've struck out on higher-caliber talent. The truth is that Chicago's fire sale was smoldering before it even began.

COLORADO AVALANCHE

THAT THE TRIUMVIRATE OF Nathan MacKinnon, Mikko Rantanen and Valeri Nichushkin have been responsible for much of Colorado's offense hardly counts as a surprise. But that trio entering the new year accounting for more than 40 percent of the Avs' goal-scoring is a touch concerning. Come the playoffs, depth is the watchword, and while the Avs have plenty of middle-six oomph at their disposal, they'd do well to add another threat up front, especially with Nichushkin entering the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program in mid-January.

The return of Artturi Lehkonen, a 21-goal scorer last season, helps, but it also creates another cap challenge. Given his limited budget and dearth of top-tier assets, barring a willingness to continue trading away first-round picks, GM Chris MacFarland will be forced to either pick around the edges or get creative. So, while a high-paid and historically prolific scorer such as Vladimir Tarasenko might be out of range, perhaps a cheaper hand such as Sean Monahan, Anthony Duclair or Dominik Kubalik can do, with the Avs using B-level prospects such as **SEAN BEHRENS** as bait. Regardless, Colorado will continue to push its chips to the middle and give this uber-talented core every chance to contend.

DALLAS STARS

NOT EVEN THE MOST optimistic Stars fan could have seen Dallas' summer signings fitting in so spectacularly. Matt Duchene has been a near-point-per-game scorer. Craig Smith and Sam Steel have proven useful role players. The result is that the Stars enter the second half of the season and the madness of deadline day with one of the best records in the Western Conference and few holes to fill.

But that doesn't mean they shouldn't take some swings. Few will quibble with Dallas' top-four group, but one way to bolster an already impressive defense corps would be by landing Chris Tanev. Not only would Tanev take a serious load off of Ryan Suter and create a better blueline balance, but the Flames D-man would also provide PK ability, a veteran presence and a dash of toughness.

The hurdle is Tanev's $4.5-million cap hit. Making the money work will require serious salary retention by the Flames. That might mean Dallas is forced to either pay a hefty price – perhaps a prospect such as **TY DELLANDREA** – or instead turn its attention to the likes of Matt Dumba, Troy Stecher or Ilya Lyubushkin. The latter options range from slightly to significantly cheaper, so the Stars have to be wary of skimping when splurging is what the job requires.

DUMBA: JEROME MIRON-USA TODAY SPORTS; JOHNSON: NICK TURCHIARO-USA TODAY SPORTS; BEHRENS: CLARKSON CREATIVE/UNIVERSITY OF DENVER ATHLETICS; DELLANDREA: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

MINNESOTA WILD

THAT THE WILD ARE performing better post-coaching change doesn't necessarily mean they've performed well enough to enter the deadline as anything other than sellers. And even if the Wild stuck to simply tinkering, they're not built to perform a playoff miracle. That leaves only one option: sell. However, even that comes with difficulties, as the Wild's most attractive pieces are locked in beyond this season.

That said, perhaps Minnesota moving a notable player isn't farfetched. While others will draw more interest, left winger Marcus Johansson has put together a nice campaign, and his $2-million cap hit fits the budget for many teams. And might now be the time for the Wild to get the best possible return for Mats Zuccarello? He's defying the aging curve and scoring at the second-highest rate of his career. He recently inked an extension and has a no-movement clause, but a chance at contention could be enticing. If Minnesota retains salary, his $4.125-million cap hit over the next two seasons isn't too much to stomach.

If it comes down to rentals, the likeliest to go are D-men Alex Goligoski and **ZACH BOGOSIAN** – cost-effective third-pairing options for teams seeking a vet presence. Sadly, given his subpar stats this season, Marc-Andre Fleury won't have many suitors.

NASHVILLE PREDATORS

A CHANGING OF THE guard in Nashville didn't coincide with a full-scale rebuild, and the Predators' plan to retool has put them in playoff contention. The question now is how aggressive GM Barry Trotz is willing to be to punch his club's ticket to the dance.

The pragmatist's view would be that Trotz should exercise some level of caution and read the room, so to speak. With a feeble grasp on a wild-card spot at the midpoint of the season and several teams in the mix, taking big swings now could lead to significant trouble later. It might then be advisable to make sensible swaps, moving out mid-round draft selections and bit players in order to upgrade current pieces and solidify the roster. Finding a new home for **TYSON BARRIE**, too, would work for the right return.

However, if Trotz wants to be bold, he could dangle a young talent such as Philip Tomasino. Scarcely used and perhaps miscast, Tomasino has an upside that could make him a valuable trade chip if Nashville wanted to swing for the fences. That the Preds have three 2024 second-round picks, three 2024 fourths and two 2025 first-rounders also gives Trotz assets to work with.

ST. LOUIS BLUES

THE SITUATION SHOULDN'T BE categorized as a disaster, but St. Louis' contract commitments won't allow the franchise to be nimble at the deadline. To wit, the Blues have $23.5 million committed to four defensemen through 2025-26, a four-forward core with cap hits no lower than $5.8 million for this campaign and next, and mercurial netminder Jordan Binnington locked in for three more years at $6 million. The Blues' limbo status, thus, isn't so much a choice as what has been foisted upon them by circumstance.

But the Blues aren't entirely stuck. Veteran D-man **MARCO SCANDELLA** and middle-sixers Sammy Blais, Oskar Sundqvist and Kasperi Kapanen are perfect rental fodder who can draw mid-to-late-round picks in return. However, to expect much more from St. Louis at the deadline is misguided – and it'd be equally foolish for the Blues, who aren't an aimless outfit but instead one lacking a few pieces.

So, what would a perfect deadline look like in St. Louis? One in which they bring in a few picks, add a prospect or two and continue with an eye toward the future. Fortunes can change quickly in the NHL, and some off-season tweaking and tuning could see the Blues back in the 'buyer' category next season.

WINNIPEG JETS

A SURPRISING PURSUIT OF the Presidents' Trophy has put the Jets firmly in the 'buyer' category, though GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has to be careful not to upset team chemistry. He must also operate on a tight budget and without a cache of draft capital.

Luckily, the Jets can benefit from targeting role players rather than top-end talents, especially considering their greatest struggles have been on special teams. Despite their record, the Jets were a bottom-10 team in penalty-killing and power-play percentage. If the Jets were to be bold, getting Elias Lindholm would check both boxes, while more economical options such as Adam Henrique and Vladimir Tarasenko could fit specific bills. Second-tier options such as Anthony Duclair and Dominik Kubalik are also worth considering, and despite a chock-full blueline, it wouldn't be surprising if the Jets kicked the tires

on a depth rearguard. The Ducks' Ilya Lyubushkin could be a good fit.

Without draft capital, adding reinforcements will likely mean parting with prospects. Recent top picks Chaz Lucius, Rutger McGroarty and Brad Lambert seem unlikely trade candidates, but **VILLE HEINOLA**, Declan Chisholm and Nikita Chibrikov could be among those offered in significant swaps.

BOGOSIAN: TERRENCE LEE-USA TODAY SPORTS; BARRIE: PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; SCANDELLA: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; HEINOLA: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

PACIFIC DIVISION

TRADE DEADLINE PREVIEW BY BRIAN COSTELLO

ANAHEIM DUCKS

NO ACTIVE ANAHEIM DUCK has more goals since 2017 than **ADAM HENRIQUE**. But it's a near certainty the 33-year-old's days with the franchise are coming to a close this spring. He's in the final season of a five-year deal with a $5.83 million AAV. Henrique has proven to be a reliable two-way pivot who is strong in the faceoff circle (winning 53 percent of draws since 2017) and productive on the power play (only Cam Fowler has more PP points since 2017). Henrique would be a welcome depth addition to a playoff contender's center position, and the Ducks could absorb part of his salary. Henrique went to the Cup final as a rookie with New Jersey in 2011-12.

Also available as pending UFAs are rugged defenseman Ilya Lyubushkin, checker Sam Carrick and winger Jakob Silfverberg. Anaheim would also listen to offers for goalie John Gibson, but rest assured, there won't be any fire sales for the 30-year-old stopper, who has three seasons left at $6.4 million per. The rebuilding Ducks are looking for draft capital or skilled young forwards in return.

The Ducks are also reported to be shopping flashy center Trevor Zegras, who is in the first year of a three-year deal at $5.75 million AAV. He's battled injuries all season.

EDMONTON OILERS

SAME OLD STORY FOR the Oilers. They'd have the best starting lineup in the league if it were the 1920s and NHLers played 60 minutes a game. But Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl spend more time watching from the bench than they do playing. So do Zach Hyman, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Evan Bouchard. Edmonton simply needs to get stronger further down the lineup in order to win three or four long playoff series. GM Ken Holland rolled the dice and signed wily Corey Perry in January. He will surely boost the bottom six and provide sandpaper when playoff battles intensify. Warren Foegele and Ryan McLeod have stepped up in secondary roles to make meaningful contributions. That has to continue. Mattias Ekholm was a key but costly addition to the defense last year, and ideally, the Oilers can pick up another No. 4 or 5 rearguard to push Vincent Desharnais out of the top six. There should be more concern about that than finding a proven backup to Stuart Skinner.

The Oilers have almost nothing in the way of assets to trade for a big- or even medium-name rental. Their top prospect is **XAVIER BOURGAULT**, but he's just a 21-year-old B-lister. Then again, they can always trade their first-round pick like last year.

CALGARY FLAMES

IT MAKES SENSE THAT the league's most mediocre team of the century is stuck in the middle between buyer and seller. But for this iteration, the pending-UFA-laden Flames will most certainly be sellers as the March 8 deadline approaches. It all started in December, when Calgary dealt Nikita Zadorov to Vancouver for a pair of draft picks. In short order, the Flames will trade at least two of Chris Tanev, Noah Hanifin and **ELIAS LINDHOLM**, all pending UFAs. Productive grinder A.J. Greer is also on an expiring contract and can boost a lot of fourth lines around the league. Don't be surprised if Calgary trades either Jacob Markstrom or Dan Vladar if the right offer comes along. The Flames want to make room for super-stopper Dustin Wolf, and both Markstrom and Vladar have term left on their deals. The best time to trade goalies is at the deadline, with contending teams looking to shore up the crease for their upcoming playoff runs.

Calgary management has said it doesn't want a major rebuild, so expect a blend of players, NHL-ready prospects and maybe some picks in return rather than a boatload of firsts and seconds. The development system needs a reboot, and the return on those pending UFAs should be significant.

LOS ANGELES KINGS

MUCH LIKE LAST SEASON, when the Kings acquired Joonas Korpisalo at the trade deadline to solidify the crease going into the playoffs, Los Angeles again needs a healthy and reliable backup to 36-year-old Cam Talbot. But with little cap room, the Kings need to do it on the cheap and must be selective about the target. Korpisalo was brilliant down the stretch last season and was a star in the first three playoff games against Edmonton (winning two) before the Oilers surged. Maybe L.A. has a gut feeling about Dan Vladar in Calgary, James Reimer in Detroit or Jake Allen or Cayden Primeau in Montreal. Talbot will still be the main man, but his health will always be a concern.

The blueline is another area to watch. Is 20-year-old Brandt Clarke making a good enough impression to remain a fixture with the Kings, or do they have to go out and get a veteran reinforcement?

For now, Andreas Englund, Jordan Spence and Clarke have combined for fewer than 200 NHL games, and they're Nos. 5-6-7 in the blueline pecking order.

The Kings have traded away their second-, third- and fifth-round picks in 2024, so are they willing to part with the first? Unlikely. If not, prospect **ALEX TURCOTTE** is near-ready and holds the most marquee value.

HENRIQUE+LINDHOM: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOURGAULT: PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; TURCOTTE: STAN SZETO-USA TODAY SPORTS

SAN JOSE SHARKS

THERE'S A SMORGASBORD OF Sharks players on the buffet table available for acquisition, and only a select few are considered off-limits. Pending UFAs are forwards **ANTHONY DUCLAIR**, Mike Hoffman, Kevin Labanc, Alexander Barabanov, Justin Bailey, Ryan Carpenter and goalie Kaapo Kahkonen. And surely the Sharks would take on salary if any team showed interest in those players. Left winger Fabian Zetterlund is having a career year at 24 and is on an inexpensive $1.45-million deal this season and next. Defensemen Kyle Burroughs and Jan Rutta rank fifth and sixth on the team in ice time and are signed beyond this season on affordable contracts. They could be ideal depth defensemen on contending teams down the stretch. Even Mackenzie Blackwood is available for teams looking to shore up their backup goaltending.

At this point in their rebuild, the Sharks are looking for prospects and picks. Their development system is finally on the upswing after a decade of being bottom of the barrel due to a lack of quality and quantity of draft picks. After nabbing Will Smith fourth overall in 2023, the Sharks are poised to make another very high selection this year. They'd love to supplement that with additional picks in later rounds.

SEATTLE KRAKEN

TWAS THE WEEK BEFORE Christmas and all through Washington State, Kraken fans were moaning with Seattle sitting 26th in the NHL. But since then, the Kraken rattled off nine straight wins to sit on the cusp of wild-card contention. Does that make them buyers or sellers at the deadline? Knowing GM Ron Francis, that will be an 11th-hour decision. They're not going to throw in the towel on the season, but they're not going to offload prospects or picks in an attempt to make the post-season, either. Seattle has seven pending UFAs in the lineup, many of whom may generate interest around the league. They include forwards Jordan Eberle, Tomas Tatar, Alexander Wennberg, Devin Shore and **PIERRE-EDOUARD BELLEMARE**, defenseman Justin Schultz and goalie Chris Driedger. The Kraken would love to make room for prospects like Shane Wright and Ryker Evans, so don't be surprised if they offload a veteran or two even as they scramble to make the playoffs.

If the Kraken decide to go for it, they need more firepower. They're among the NHL's lowest-scoring teams, with Oliver Bjorkstrand, Jared McCann and Eeli Tolvanen the only forwards on pace to top 50 points. Maybe they'd be interested in Vancouver's Conor Garland.

VANCOUVER CANUCKS

THE CANUCKS WOULD LOVE to be buyers at the trade deadline, but there's no salary-cap room, unless it's a money-in-for-money-out deal, which has been the speculation involving **CONOR GARLAND** (two years remaining after this one at $4.95 million per) for more than 12 months now. Garland's production is down a bit over previous years, but it hasn't fallen off a cliff. In 22 games starting in December and going into the new year, Garland had 17 points. Vancouver would love to add more skill up front after GM Patrik Allvin did well adding unsung bottom-six pieces such as Sam Lafferty, Dakota Joshua and Teddy Blueger in recent years. The Canucks also added more brawn on the blueline with Nikita Zadorov, Ian Cole and Carson Soucy. Vancouver already looks built for playoff hockey.

If the Canucks are going to make any roster additions down the stretch, it's more probable they'll do it from within. Prospects Vasily Podkolzin, Nils Aman and Linus Karlsson have performed well in recent NHL trials. And Sheldon Dries has spent parts of the past five seasons in the NHL. Even backup goaltending is not an issue. Casey DeSmith is capable enough to give Thatcher Demko rest in the second half of the season.

VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

FOR PERHAPS THE FIRST time in their short history, the Golden Knights have plenty of cap space to work with this off-season. With about $15 million coming off the books and the cap limit rising at least $3 million, GM Kelly McCrimmon has a variety of options. But as defending Cup champions and among the league's top tier again this season, Vegas isn't in a position to offload its pending UFAs for picks and prospects. How would it look if Jonathan Marchessault, Chandler Stephenson, **ALEC MARTINEZ**, William Carrier and even Michael Amadio were peddled elsewhere while the Knights' competitive window was still wide open? Plus, there's a decent chance those players would consider hometown-discount contracts to keep a good thing going, especially if Vegas marches to the Cup final again. So, expect the Golden Knights to be fringe buyers again, much like they were last season when they got creative and found a way to fit in Ivan Barbashev under the tight salary cap.

Vegas doesn't have much in the way of top prospects to deal – although Brendan Brisson, Lukas Cormier and David Edstrom have decent promise – but the Golden Knights do have seven draft picks in 2024 to use as bargaining chips.

DUCLAIR: STAN SZETO-USA TODAY SPORTS; BELLEMARE: STEVEN BISIG-USA TODAY SPORTS; GARLAND: BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS; MARTINEZ: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; MARTINEZ: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

ANTON STRALMAN isn't done with the game quite yet, but the former NHL defenseman has been preparing for life after hockey for more than three years

BY AARON HECKMANN

A SEGUE INTO THE NEXT CHAPTER

FAMILY PHOTO COURTESY OF ANTON STRALMAN

LIFE FOR ANTON STRALMAN has been a lot different since he signed a one-year contract with HV71 of the Swedish League in July and returned to his native country after playing 16 seasons in the NHL split between seven teams.

On Dec. 17, Stralman was driving back home to Skovde at 5 p.m. – a roughly one-hour commute from Jonkoping, where HV71 is based – after a late practice. It marked the first time this season he hadn't had a Sunday off. With games on Thursdays and Saturdays, coupled with less travel and no back-to-backs, Stralman can plan things with a less intense, freer schedule.

The most noteworthy change, however, has come away from the rink: more time with his wife, Johanna, and their four children. "I still get the best of two worlds," Stralman said. "I get to play the game I love, and I get a little more time with the family."

Living back home in Sweden and being close to his parents and other family has given Stralman, 37, a peace he hadn't experienced during his NHL days. "It just puts your mind at ease," Stralman said, "in a way that it hasn't been over the last decade-and-a-half."

Stralman said he hasn't ruled out a return to the NHL, but he feels this move to Sweden is permanent. Regardless of where he ends his career, Stralman has a lot of which to be proud. The smooth-skating, dependable blueliner recorded 293 points in 938 NHL games across 16 seasons from 2007-08 to 2022-23. "I'm obviously one of the fortunate ones to be able to do it for as long as I did," Stralman said. "And it's hard (because) you never really stop to reflect on things or milestones you achieved. It'd be maybe easier when you have a little bit of a distance to it to kind of reflect on it and see how it was."

Stralman isn't quite ready to look back on his career yet. But he's been looking forward to life after hockey for more than three years. After Stralman's Florida Panthers lost in the qualifying round to the Islanders in the Toronto playoff bubble in August 2020, Johanna asked him what his plans were for the fall. After all, he had plenty of free time with the 2021-22 season not starting until the following January.

Johanna suggested that he take a college course. After all, she had started school; she's now a semester away from completing a bachelor's degree in public health. Thanks to the NHLPA UNLMT, an initiative with the goal of developing players professionally by providing them resources and support, Stralman has been working toward an international Bachelor of Science degree in strength and conditioning through Setanta College in Ireland since Sept. 2020. Strength and conditioning has always been of interest to Stralman, and that's the path he felt was best after taking a "success finder" assessment through the program. "This is a nice kind of a segue into the next life, so to speak," Stralman said.

Stralman hopes he and others who've studied on the side set the example that one can prepare for life after hockey while still playing. "The earlier you can kind of find your path and start it," he said, "it would help you once you make that decision to retire a little bit easier."

Stralman is almost halfway done the degree, and he expects it to take another three years to finish, since the program is designed at a slower pace to accommodate athletes. As for how he balanced it on the side during his time in the NHL, he finished most of his work on road trips and flights. "When most people watch a Netflix show or stream something," Stralman said, "I was digging into one of the anatomy books, and they were like, 'What are you doing?' "

> **"I get to play the game I love, and I get a little more time with the family** – Anton Stralman

One moment Stralman particularly remembers is when the Panthers were in Detroit for two games in a row during the pandemic, and he had not one but two 2,500-word written assignments to do. "It was hectic and a bit crazy," Stralman said, "but I pulled it off...just so I didn't have to take it home and finish it."

Stralman endeavored to do all his work on the road. When he was home, he wanted his sole focus to be on his family.

Stralman has put his education to use while playing. In fact, he made an "eye-opening" nutritional discovery that helped him elevate his game. In one of his courses while playing for the Panthers, he had a food-diary assignment where he had to measure, track and compile his food intake over three days.

Between his results and course lectures, he identified that his plate model was off: his protein intake was too high, and he wasn't eating enough carbohydrates. Stralman implemented the necessary adjustments to his diet and found that his energy during games noticeably improved. As for how many other players an adjustment like this could help? "Probably a lot," he said.

Stralman said it's also been beneficial to be near strength and conditioning coaches and trainers while taking courses the past three years because he could ask them questions and see the process up close.

He doesn't know where he will take his expertise after he retires from playing. He said working for a team is an option eventually, but that's not something he would want to pursue while his children are at home. He has thought about opening his own business. In fact, he took a non-credit business economics and entrepreneurship class through Stanford University last year thanks to the NHLPA's program.

"I don't need this job for the sense of financial needs," Stralman said. "It's more for my brain and feeling that I have a purpose, feeling that I get an outlet for something that I'm going to obviously miss greatly when I retire from hockey."

MARC DESROSIERS-USA TODAY SPORTS

THE SAVING GRACE OF GOALIE ART

DAVID GUNNARSSON is the busiest and best-known goalie-mask artist in the world. But for the Swedish-based creator, his job also offers a welcome respite from OCD issues BY WILL ZIMMERMAN

PHOTO COURTESY OF NHL.COM

BEFORE HE WAS painting crisp blue lightning bolts for Henrik Lundqvist or soaring Bobby Orrs for Linus Ullmark, David Gunnarsson was one of the masses at Rosenlundshallen, Sweden's first indoor hockey arena. The 'Ice Palace,' as the locals once called it, was the former home of HV71, a Swedish hockey club older than the Swedish League itself.

The Rosenlundshallen has sat on the southern shore of Lake Vattern since 1958, and in 1996, a teenaged Gunnarsson was among the 4,500 fans who filled the Palace to watch the hometown club. Fluorescent lights suspended from the low-hanging ceiling soaked the navy-blue sweaters worn by HV71 players. Gunnarsson stood and watched. The bleachers were cheaper.

If the flicking fluorescent over the opponent's blueline or the uneven geometry of Rosenlundshallen's colored seats – a mishmash of burnt orange, muted teal and ember red – triggered his OCD, Gunnarsson didn't mention it to his friends. Instead, from behind thick, wire-rimmed glasses, his gaze tracked the goalies at either end. Their masks were barren and unexplored expanses, little more than white specks from the bleachers. He mused at the thought that someone could do more to adorn those masks, and maybe that someone could be him.

PAINTER AND PUCKSTOPPERS
Gunnarsson, here with Henrik Lundqvist and Kevin Weekes, has created over 5,000 masks.

But Gunnarsson shook off that last idea as quickly as it occurred. At the time, he believed people with mental-health disorders like his couldn't be artists. And yet, when he was creating, the disdain and fear seemed to drain away, and aspiration swelled. "The OCD couldn't touch me when I was painting," Gunnarsson said. "I was free."

And so, 27 years, 5,000 masks and one iconic brand name later, 'DaveArt' paints onward.

A 15-year-old Gunnarsson thought himself too old to see *Beauty and the Beast* alone, so he brought his sister. Attendance was self-assigned homework, or something like it, at least. He had learned that Disney artists were using new airbrush techniques to paint the backgrounds in their films. Gunnarsson wondered if there was a use for the airbrush in his own art.

He uses "art" as the catch-all for his teenage enterprises: at 16, the short comic strips he sold to a Swedish comic company; at 17, the drawings for local newspapers; at 18, the court sketches.

Gunnarsson has possessed uncanny artistic abilities for as long as he can remember. "Creativity comes to me like running water," he said.

Today, he attributes his self-described "abnormal creativity" to his OCD, at least in part. "I've learned that many creative people have (the disorder)," Gunnarsson said, "that OCD is somehow *connected* to creativity."

It's a radical reframing, especially since OCD haunted him throughout adolescence. More than once, Gunnarsson felt compelled to abandon his artistic aspirations entirely. "I didn't understand what I was struggling with," he said. "I didn't tell my parents, and I kept it all to myself. Now that I'm grown up, I want to talk about my OCD so other people don't make that same mistake."

He eventually shared his struggles with his parents, and they set him up with a therapist. Buoyed by the support, he was encouraged to channel the whole of his efforts into his art.

The burgeoning artist started back at the beginning with his Disney favorites – "the classics," as he calls them – *Beauty and the Beast*, *Robin Hood* and *The Jungle Book*. Over the course of years, he taught himself the same airbrush movements and processes that Disney's "imagineers" were using to balance light and shadow and connect and blend colors.

Versatility with the airbrush is indispensable in his line of

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVID GUNNARSSON

work. Gunnarsson's clientele have been known for their particularities and insatiability – whatever the goalie desires, Gunnarsson must be able to paint. "I've worked hard to be able to do portraits if a customer wants something photorealistic," Gunnarsson said. "And if they want something funny or cartoony or cute or scary, I can do that, too."

A photorealistic Ron Burgundy is churned out with the same speed and precision as a pixelated image of Pac-Man. On any given day, Gunnarsson is splitting his time between three projects for three netminders, and he says that variety keeps him engaged. He prides himself on having never repeated a design. Every mask has a unique narrative. "It cannot be just some paintings here and there," Gunnarsson said. "It must connect with the goalie and have a theme. Story is so important."

As business has proliferated, Gunnarsson has been asked to paint much more: restaurant interiors, school murals, playgrounds, even a Formula 1 race car. He's turned down every request except for one.

On a Friday evening in January 2022, moments before Lundqvist's jersey was raised to the rafters at Madison Square Garden, the netminder was presented with an air-brushed electric guitar. Of course, Gunnarsson's design had to be streaked with the same blue lightning bolts that had adorned every mask Lundqvist sported across 15 seasons on Broadway.

As with the masks, the guitar was painted at the DaveArt studio – the old family barn in Savsjo, Sweden, which Gunnarsson transformed into his studio early in his career. Today, he takes his morning coffee where the hay used to sit. Painting happens in what was formerly the pigs' quadrant. No livestock remains, but still, the family business booms.

It's an incredible fact that Gunnarsson can flip to practically any professional hockey game in North America or Sweden on any given night and see his designs sported by at least one of the netminders. Gunnarsson is asked what the anxiety-ridden teenager in the bleachers at Rosenlundshallen would make of that. In a tone that conveys a humble thankfulness for the acclaim his art has received but more so for the privilege to pursue his greatest passion every day, he says simply, "It'd be hard to understand."

FAMILY BUSINESS

Gunnarsson turned a barn into the 'DaveArt' studio, and a booming industry was born.

On the night his number was raised to the MSG rafters, Lundqvist was gifted a Gunnarsson-styled guitar.

TOP+RIGHT: PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVID GUNNARSSON; LUNDQVIST: PHOTO COURTESY OF HAGSTROM GUITARS OF SWEDEN

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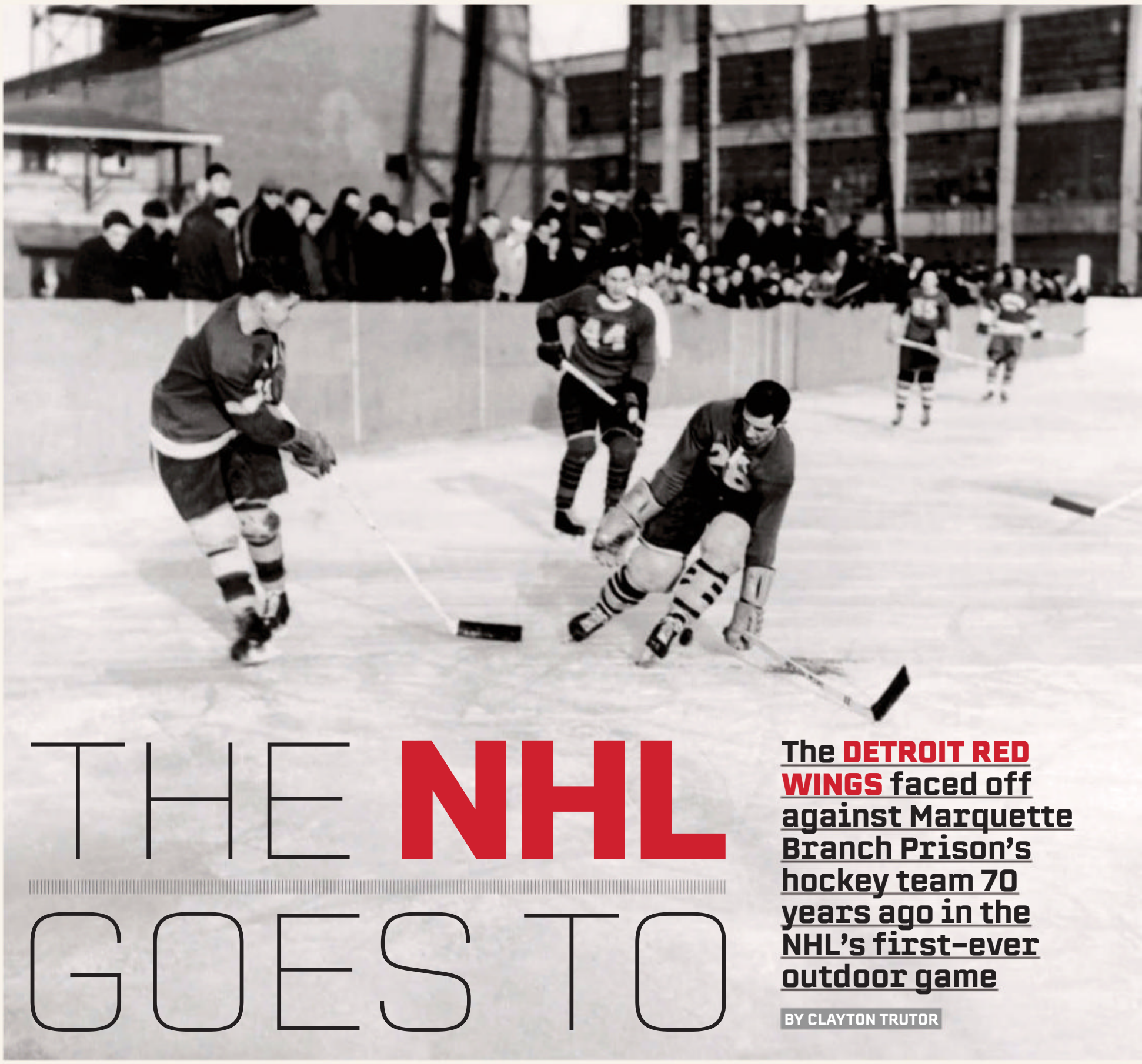

THE NHL GOES TO JAIL

The DETROIT RED WINGS faced off against Marquette Branch Prison's hockey team 70 years ago in the NHL's first-ever outdoor game

BY CLAYTON TRUTOR

Howe, Lindsay, Sawchuk and the rest of the Wings played an exhibition game in front of 600 inmates.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MARQUETTE REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER

LONG BEFORE THE FIRST Winter Classic between the Buffalo Sabres and Pittsburgh Penguins in front of more than 70,000 fans at Ralph Wilson Stadium in 2008, or the trendsetting Canadiens-Oilers Heritage Classic in 2003, an NHL team tried its hand at an outdoor game.

On Feb. 2, 1954, the Detroit Red Wings travelled to Michigan's Upper Peninsula for an exhibition game at a maximum-security prison. The likes of Gordie Howe, Ted Lindsay and Terry Sawchuk played in lightly falling snow against the Marquette Branch Prison team for a crowd of roughly 600 felons. "We were all Canadian kids, so we all played a lot outdoors as youngsters," recalled Detroit left winger Marty Pavelich. "It was delightful. We had stocking caps on. It wasn't a real cold day, and the ice was perfect."

Now 96, Pavelich is the last surviving regular from the dynastic Detroit teams of the late 1940s and early '50s who won seven consecutive regular-season titles and four Stanley Cups.

The backstory to the Red Wings' trip to Marquette began in June 1953. Team owner Jack Adams and captain Lindsay travelled to the Upper Peninsula on a promotional tour for Stroh's Beer. Their tour took them to 'Little Siberia' or the 'Alcatraz of the North,' as the prison was known to inmates. Opened in 1889, Marquette Branch Prison was a place where Michigan lodged its most dangerous offenders and incorrigibles. Bounded by the backwoods of northern Michigan and Lake Superior, there was virtually nowhere to run for prisoners who sought to escape from the heavily fortified institution.

Adams and Lindsay put on a short presentation for the Marquette inmates and took questions from the crowd, which included many Detroiters who followed the team closely. Lindsay told reporters how impressed he was with the hockey knowledge of the inmates. He joked with prisoners that he could relate to their predicament, being the most penalized player in the league across the six previous seasons. Lindsay became a favorite in the cellblock.

Prison warden Emery E. Jacques knew an opportunity when he saw one. Since taking over as warden in 1948, Jacques had preached the character-building value of sports to prisoners while expanding Marquette's recreational options beyond baseball and softball. He had recently hired Marquette native and local hockey legend Leonard 'Oakie' Brumm, who played defense on the University of Michigan's 1948 championship team, to serve as the prison's first athletic director.

After the presentation, Jacques asked Adams if the Red Wings might return for an exhibition game against the prison's hockey team. Informal hockey games on an improvised sheet of ice began at the prison in 1950. Jacques had plans to build a permanent boarded rink and establish a team that competed against outside competition, but neither the team nor the rink existed at the time of their conversation. Offhandedly, Adams said he'd be happy to bring the Wings if the prison created a team and built a permanent playing facility. "Jack said 'Sure' and kind of forgot about it, but the guy (Jacques) called him on it," Pavelich said.

JACK ADAMS & **TED LINDSAY**

By the time Jacques called Adams in December 1953 to set up a date, Marquette Branch Prison had established a hockey team that had adopted the tongue-in-cheek moniker 'Pirates' and built a boarded outdoor rink with beautiful ice that was tended by a crew of 15 inmates. Jacques promised that the safety of the players would be ensured by sharpshooters stationed at watchtowers around the prison.

'Little Siberia' now had the only prison hockey team and the only prison hockey rink in the United States. Adams agreed to a game during a four-day break in Detroit's schedule at the beginning of February.

It was Brumm who made the exhibition game possible. Before taking over at Marquette, the 26-year-old coached hockey at the University of Wyoming and served as athletic director at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. He built up a robust recreational program at Marquette – including sports such as football, squash and miniature golf – but the hockey team was his passion. Very few players on the prison team had previous experience playing organized hockey, but Brumm showed great acumen in coaching them. The prison's budding hockey program got help from nearby Michigan Tech and the semi-pro Marquette Sentinels, who donated used equipment to help Brumm start the project.

Brumm led his Pirates by example on the ice, playing defense for the team. In short order, Brumm fashioned the newly christened Pirates into a team capable of competing against local amateurs. At the same time, he oversaw construction of the prison's permanent outdoor rink. Before the Red Wings game, the Pirates played six games that winter against competition from the Upper Peninsula and northern Wisconsin, posting a 4-1-1 record. In each game, the incarcerated Pirates enjoyed home-ice advantage.

The most well-known members of the Marquette Pirates were Harry Keywell and Ray Bernstein, members of the Purple Gang, Detroit's most feared organized crime outfit of the Prohibition Era. The Sergio Leone-directed mob classic *Once Upon a Time in America* was inspired in part by the gang.

In its preview of the outdoor exhibition, the *Detroit Free Press* couldn't pass on the double entendre of the "cooler" conditions, being that the game was taking place outdoors in the winter and also at a prison, which in Jimmy Cagney-movie parlance was known as "the cooler." Weather forecasts called for temperatures in the low teens, but it turned out to be a sunny, 21-degree Fahrenheit day with no wind. Every prisoner except those in solitary confinement attended. "We were all kind of nervous, but it all worked out just fine," Pavelich said. "We enjoyed ourselves immensely."

Pavelich knew all about Marquette Prison's reputation, having grown up 150 miles away in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. After changing on the prison grounds, Pavelich and the rest of the Wings tested out the ice. While getting ready for the game, Pavelich had a bizarre encounter. "I was skating around, warming up, and a guy was hollering, 'Marty! Marty!' And I said, 'Who do I know in prison?' It was our mailman (from Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.). He pulled a bank job over in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., and he got caught, and he was in jail."

The game proceeded smoothly and predictably. The Red Wings allowed the Pirates to move the puck up ice in the first period but quickly transformed their turnovers into a bushel of goals. Sawchuk passed the time alternating between the Ken Dryden pose and sitting on top of the net. After 20 minutes, the Wings held an 18-0 advantage.

In the second period, Sawchuk, Lindsay and Howe switched sides and switched sweaters. The scorekeeper lost count shortly thereafter, and the second 20 minutes evolved into a shinny affair. The third period was a combination of a display and clinic by the Red Wings, who showed off their shooting, passing and puck-handling skills in an intersquad scrimmage for the assemblage.

> **We were all kind of nervous, but it all worked out just fine. We enjoyed ourselves immensely** – Marty Pavelich

OAKIE BRUMM

After the game, players from the prison team presented members of the Red Wings with hand-tooled leather billfolds made by prisoners, a specialty of the prison workshop. Each player received a wallet that included his name and the Red Wings logo. The players had dinner with the inmates while chatting with them and signing autographs. 'Terrible Ted' remained the prisoners' favorite.

"Ted Lindsay started writing letters back and forth with a couple of the guys at the prison," Pavelich said.

That evening, the Wings played an exhibition game against the Marquette Sentinels of the semi-pro Northern Michigan League. The Sentinels had, in fact, put up the money for the Wings' travel expenses to Marquette in exchange for an exhibition game. Several thousand onlookers at the Palestra witnessed the Wings beat the hometown Sentinels 16-6 in a lighthearted affair not unlike the prison game.

The Wings were no worse for wear after the Marquette trip. They hit the ground running on the home stretch of their schedule, pummelling the Boston Bruins 5-0 in Detroit. Ten weeks after the games in Marquette, the Wings finished off the Montreal Canadiens to earn the third of their four Cups during this championship era.

The trip was a public-relations coup for Jacques, Brumm and the prison administration. It offered proof not only that the prisoners could behave decently while carrying sticks and wearing sharpened skates, but it also demonstrated the ability of prison officials to rehabilitate apparent incorrigibles to the point where they could function as a team and comport themselves as gentleman in friendly competition.

HOME GAMES ONLY
The Marquette Branch Prison Pirates, circa 1959. The team played until at least 1975.

Jacques served as warden until his death at 52 in 1956. Brumm quit as the prison's athletic director in 1957 to take a position in his family's construction business. During his tenure as coach, the Pirates won more than two-thirds of their games. The prison team continued playing intermittently until at least 1975. Brumm later became coach-GM of the Marquette Iron Rangers. In 1969, Brumm signed goalie Karen Koch, who was probably the first professional women's hockey player in the U.S. During 1973-74, he signed Jeff and Steve Carlson, who later went on to fame as two of the three Hanson brothers in *Slap Shot*. To cap off his career, Brumm moved to Kuwait in the early 1980s and set up a professional hockey league in the oil-rich emirate.

Seven players, plus owner Adams and coach Tommy Ivan, have been inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame from the 1953-54 Red Wings team. Pavelich, who some feel ought to be inducted as one of the game's top defensive forwards, has spent his retirement years in Big Sky, Mont., building a robust youth-hockey program in an area that was devoid of hockey when he arrived in 1993. The community recently recognized his efforts by naming the Marty Pavelich Ice Rink in his honor.

TOP: PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARCHIVES OF MICHIGAN; BOTTOM: PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MARQUETTE REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER

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PWHL MINNESOTA

NEW BEGINNINGS

Even with her Hall of Fame-caliber resume, Coyne Schofield didn't know whether she'd find her place in the PWHL. But she's finding her way in Minnesota **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

FROM THEIR EARLIEST DAYS, young hockey players rely on their parents to get them to their games and practices and events.

So it should come as no surprise that on Dec. 26, Kendall Coyne Schofield enlisted her mother, Ahlise, for the six-hour drive from the Chicago suburbs to Minneapolis-St. Paul, where a new challenge awaited with PWHL Minnesota.

Also along for the ride: Drew John Schofield – the first son of Coyne and NFL offensive lineman Michael Schofield – who was born on July 1, 2023.

Coyne has won an Olympic gold medal, six World Championship golds and is a former captain of Team USA. Her new GM, Natalie Darwitz, calls her "a future Hall of Famer." But it's her motherhood journey to date that Coyne calls "the greatest six months of my life."

It was no surprise to see her signed as one of Minnesota's first three free agents back in September or to see her wearing the 'C' when they lined up against Boston on Jan. 3. But as Coyne sat at the bargaining table last summer, a critical voice as the executive committee of the PWHL Players' Association hammered out its inaugural collective bargaining agreement, she wasn't sure there would be a spot for her on the ice. "I didn't know if my phone would ring at all, to be honest," she said. "My last game with the U.S. was December 19, 2022. Then I announced my pregnancy, so I didn't play leading into that free-agency period. I thought the majority of the GMs would write me off, that I'm not going to be the player that I once was."

Darwitz, a former Team USA captain and three-time World Championship gold medallist, didn't see it that way. "I could talk all day about Kendall's attributes, both on and off the ice," Darwitz said. "What a tremendous person she is and how much she's pushed this game forward, not only our game but women's sports in general. Leadership is really important, No. 1, and she certainly brings tons of respect and leadership."

Minnesota's bench is headed up by former NHLer Ken Klee, who coached the U.S. women's team to World Championship gold in 2015 and 2016, which helped set the foundation for their Olympic gold-medal win in Pyeongchang in 2018. So Coyne is plenty familiar with her new bench boss.

Given the deep roots of women's hockey in the region, especially with the NCAA's Minnesota Golden Gophers, it's understandable that the PWHL roster is rich with homegrown talent. That starts with Darwitz, a two-time NCAA champion and three-time all-American from Eagan, a southern suburb of Minneapolis-St. Paul.

The defense is led by Roseville native Lee Stecklein, a former Gophers captain who's a three-time NCAA national champion and has been Coyne's USA Hockey teammate for over a decade. "Not only will she be the backbone of the

BEST IN 'SCHO'

Coyne Schofield, who captained both Northeastern and Team USA, was an obvious choice as Minnesota's leader.

BRIAN FLUHARTY-USA TODAY SPORTS

team, she'll be the backbone of the blueline, too," Coyne said.

On Sept. 1, the stars aligned when Minnesota won the PWHL's first draft lottery. The team used the top pick on another homegrown Gophers captain – and the 2022 Patty Kazmaier Award winner as the top player in NCAA women's hockey – 23-year-old Lake City native Taylor Heise. "She hit the jackpot in terms of, 'Congratulations on being born when you were born,' " said Coyne with a laugh. "Of course, she's earned it, but for someone who's been out of college for so long and been embracing the grind that the reality of women's hockey has been, it's great to see players like Taylor Heise be able to come out of college as a first-round draft pick and experience pro hockey the way that players should have been able to experience it for a long time."

It's fitting that Heise scored the first goal in Minnesota franchise history on Jan. 3, centering the top line with Coyne on her right side and Czechia's Denisa Krizova on her left.

And while the puck dropped for the inaugural 24-game season before the league's franchises finalized their team nicknames or logos, the scale of the games is bigger than ever before. TV ratings are great, and PWHL Minnesota is playing its home games at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, the home of the NHL's Minnesota Wild.

The differences between the PWHL and the circuits that preceded it are enormous, and it's not just about money. The league's advisory board is made up of key L.A. Dodgers executives Stan Kasten and Royce Cohen, along with longtime PWHPA advisors Billie Jean King and Ilana Kloss. "All they know is professional," Coyne said. "They know what we deserve. For example, we wanted to have meals, and they're like, 'What do you mean?' We used to have to Uber to get our pre-game meals if we wanted a pre-game meal, and they're like, 'Oh, OK. We can move on.' Kind of jokingly, but we have to talk about it because we haven't had it."

KENDALL COYNE SCHOFIELD & MARIE-PHILIP POULIN

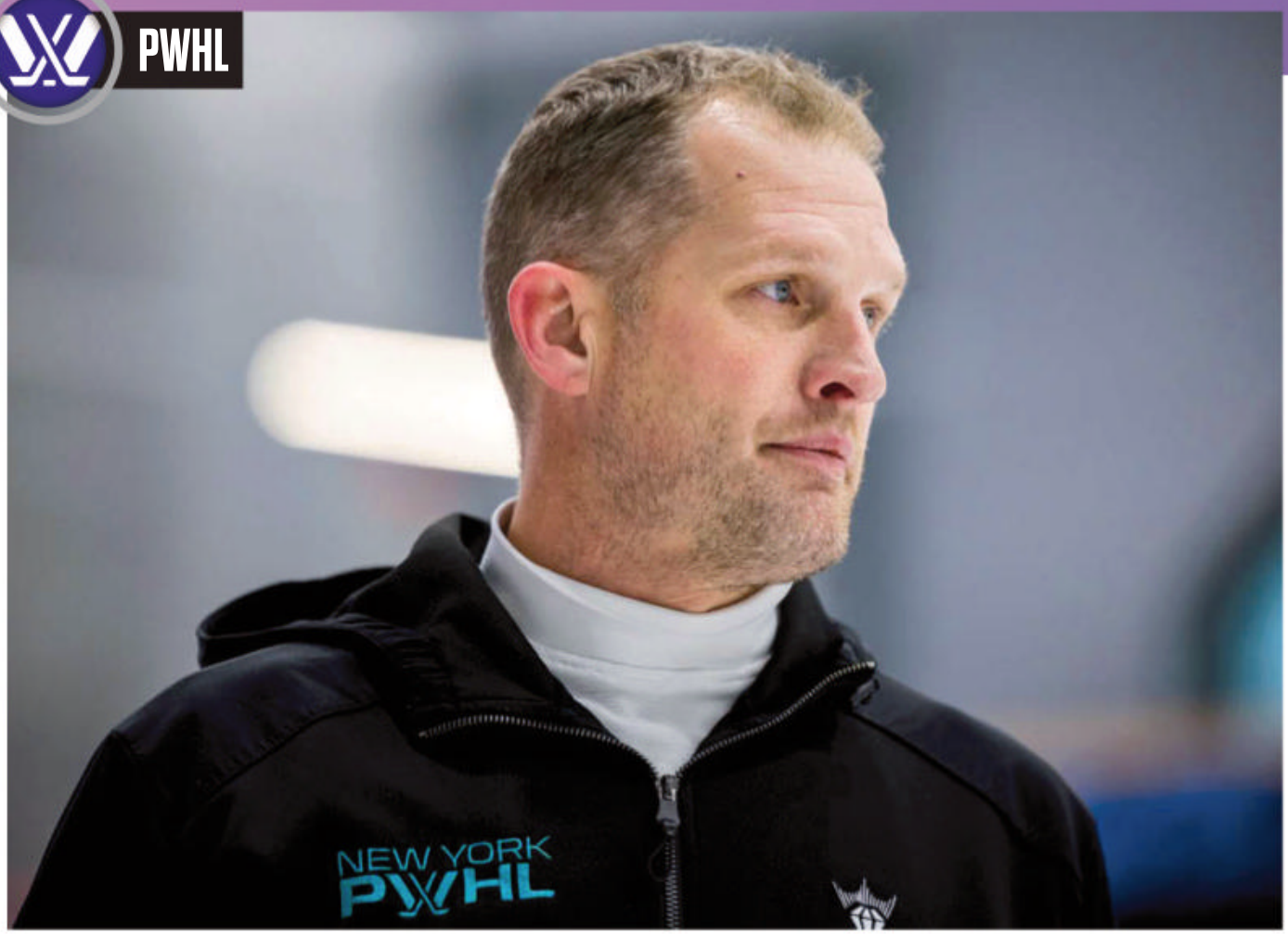
The new standards started to become apparent during training camp. Players were financially supported and able to commit to conditioning and preparation on a full-time basis without having to juggle a second job. Players are supported in their moves to their new markets and enrolled in a comprehensive benefits package.

A late add-on to that package was additional support for mothers who, like Coyne, have children under a year old. They will be provided with a nanny while they're on the road. "For me, that was life-changing," Coyne said. "And that wasn't something that was collectively bargained. That was a decision that the league felt was important and that was right to do."

In Minnesota, she's relying on babysitters as needed until Michael finishes out his season with the Detroit Lions. Life is "controlled chaos for the Schofields right now," Coyne said.

"We can't play sports for the rest of our lives, so we're going to play as long as we can," she said. "There's nothing like being a parent and being tired. It's a new kind of tired. I'm going to have to balance a lot, but there's no greater role than being a mom."

TOP: MATT KROHN-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: HEATHER POLLOCK/PWHL



PWHL NEW YORK

EVOLVING ORR PROPOSITION

He was a tough guy through and through during his playing days, but Colton Orr is taking a new tack as a women's hockey coach **BY IAN KENNEDY**

COLTON ORR AMASSED 1,186 penalty minutes in 477 career NHL games. He was a tough guy and then some, spending his career with Boston, the New York Rangers and Toronto. Since his retirement in 2016, Orr has moved to a game where there's seldom an on-ice fight but one that continues to fight for more. Over the past half-decade, Orr has become one of the premier coaches in professional women's hockey.

This year, that journey has brought the 41-year-old Winnipeg product into the PWHL as an assistant with New York. In 2019, Orr took over as coach of the NWHL's Connecticut Whale, a role he held until last summer, when the PWHL was born. Only weeks prior, Orr had signed an extension. Few staff made the move from league to league, with Hall of Famer Geraldine Heaney stepping away and others – such as Paul Mara, who is now working in the AHL; and Venla Hovi, who is coaching in the NCAA – taking jobs elsewhere. Orr, however, joined the staff in New York.

It was Mara, a veteran of 734 NHL games and a former teammate of Orr's with the Rangers, who pushed Orr to take a job coaching in women's hockey. Mara was coaching the NWHL's Boston Pride and believed Orr would be a good fit. Soon, Orr was receiving calls from the Metropolitan Riveters and his eventual team in Connecticut offering him jobs. "Paul kept pushing me, saying it would be a great opportunity for me, for my development and to help out the league," Orr said. "I really started loving it and found a passion for the game, to grow the game, and to help out these players by giving them that professional feel and the professional coaching that maybe they hadn't had in previous seasons. So, I jumped on, enjoyed it, and it's something I still love doing."

In his first season with Connecticut, the team was a basement dweller, struggling on and off the ice. Two years later, Orr took the Whale to an Isobel Cup final, and prior to the PHF's acquisition, the team had built a contender. Coming from men's hockey, there were new barriers for Orr to overcome with his team, ones he'd never faced. When he started, players were unable to live on their hockey salaries alone, and many were planning for a future away from hockey by continuing their education while they played. In spite of these obstacles, Orr saw skill and dedication to the game that inspired him. "The amount of work they put in was incredible," Orr said. "We were dealing with players who had full-time jobs or were going to school part time, so I noticed their commitment right away. The overall team game was amazing. How much they wanted to learn. How much they wanted to compete. Just the overall talent was high."

By the end of his time with the Whale, the team had signed several players to contracts worth more than $100,000 per season, and most athletes were hockey players and hockey players alone; no second job was needed. This year, that will be the norm. The new PWHL has the goal of creating a sustainable professional league, which treats the players as true professionals, and Orr is thrilled to be part of that growth. "We're starting something new, so there's going to be some hiccups, but we continue to work together to get through that," Orr said. "We continue to elevate the players' experience in playing professional hockey, and I think that's the most important thing. From the time I've been coaching women's professional hockey, I've seen it grow, and I've seen it gain a lot of traction, so we want to con-

TOP: HEATHER POLLOCK/PWHL; MIDDLE: IAN KENNEDY/THE HOCKEY NEWS

tinue to get it to a higher level."

For a person who made his living as an enforcer and played under some famously gruff coaches in John Tortorella, Ron Wilson and Randy Carlyle, Orr takes a different approach. "For me, obviously the way I played, I coach a lot differently," he said. "But I took all of the coaches and mentors I had in my career, I took a lot of little pieces I liked from each coach and tried to make my own style.

"I like to pride myself in people seeing the teams I coach and they're not what they expect. It's not a punch-you-in-the-face type of team. It's a fast-paced game. It's skilled. It's playing as a unit of five. I just really love that team concept, the team game and lots of speed."

Watching the early formation of PWHL New York, the team is certainly that. The lineup is filled with speed and elite skill. New York's opening-night roster featured former pros, multiple members of Canadian and U.S. national teams, as well as past and present national-team members from Sweden, France and Hungary. "It's an exciting time in hockey," Orr said. "It's all the best players in the world here. I think you're going to see the caliber level be raised and the speed on display right away. I really like the players we have in New York, the level we have, and how they're buying in."

Orr is serving as an assistant this season alongside coach Howie Draper and assistants Laura Brennan and Mike Sommer, with support from goaltending and video coach Gordon Woodhall. The league itself has hired more than 100 staff members to ensure players receive professional treatment.

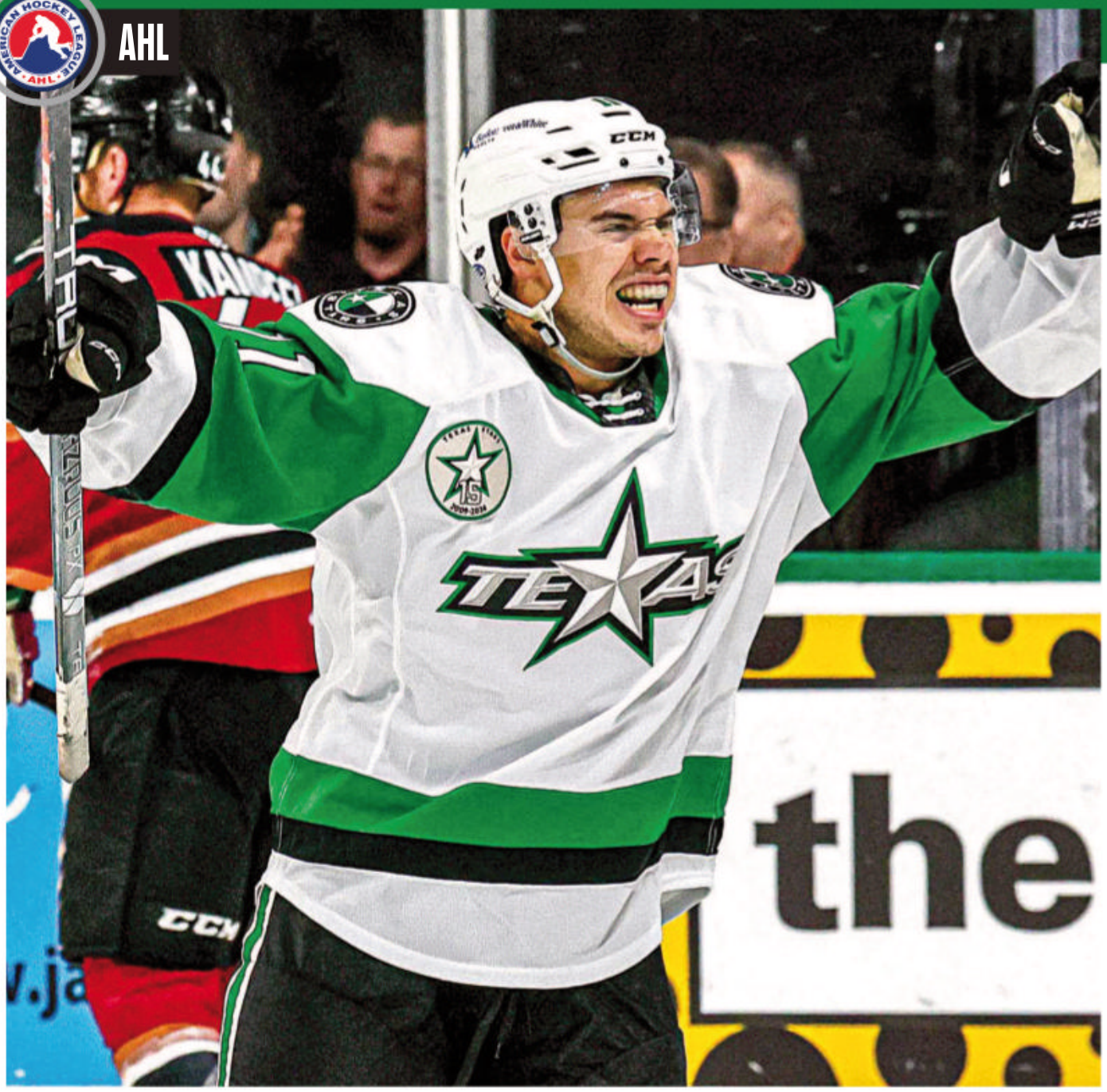
> "I LIKE TO PRIDE MYSELF IN PEOPLE SEEING THE TEAMS I COACH AND THEY'RE NOT WHAT THEY EXPECT – Colton Orr

MIDDLE: SAMMY KOGAN/THE HOCKEY NEWS; BOTTOM: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

FROM TML TO PWHL

Orr and Brian Burke, the PWHLPA's executive director, are former Leafs now working in the women's game.

The women's game has changed a lot since Orr turned pro in 2003. He's changed, too. Orr's career has seen him go from a fighter to his new role as a teacher. He's the first to admit that, early in his career, he never would've imagined becoming a women's hockey coach – but he's glad to have the opportunity. "I wasn't even thinking about it," he said. "I never had a thought I'd be here, but I'm loving that I am, and I'm loving the opportunity in the PWHL and continuing to grow the women's game."



ANDY NIETUPSKI/TEXAS STARS

TEXAS STARS

FALLING STAR A CATCH

Dallas was thrilled when Logan Stankoven dropped to the second round. And everything he's done since has proved the team was right to think he was a Round 1 talent **BY JACOB STOLLER**

LOGAN STANKOVEN WILL never forget how unwanted he felt after the first round of the 2021 draft.

With COVID-19 forcing the NHL's prospect party to be held virtually, Stankoven watched the draft from his parents' house in Kamloops, B.C. Projected as a fringe first-round talent, Stankoven was asked to have his webcam facing him and his parents for the entire broadcast – which was a pretty good indication that he'd be selected on the first night. Stankoven, his parents and other members of his immediate family and friends congregated around a TV in the family's backyard ahead of an anticipated celebration.

But Round 1 wasn't the joyous, picturesque experience Stankoven had hoped for. It went beyond the fact the pandemic had robbed his draft class of an in-person event where he could fulfill the dream of walking up to the podium, shaking the commissioner's hand and donning an NHL jersey. The stinger came because, that night, he didn't hear his name called. "I hold myself to high standards," Stankoven said. "My goal was to be drafted in the first round, and I wasn't. So, it was super disappointing, and I was pretty upset about it in the moment."

But as Stankoven stewed while thanking his inner circle for attending an underwhelming draft-night party, 2,000 miles away, Dallas Stars GM Jim Nill was focused on acquiring the super-skilled sparkplug, whom his scouts had pegged as a first-round talent. "When Round 1 ended and we reconvened to look at our list, Logan became our target," Nill said. "We thought he was going to go in the first five or six picks of the second round. The next morning, I started making calls on the draft floor and tried moving up to draft Logan, but I couldn't."

DAZZLING DEBUT

Stankoven has burst out of the gates in his AHL rookie season, tying for the league lead in scoring.

To the elation of the Stars, however, Stankoven continued to slip on Day 2, and they were able to draft him 47th overall. It wasn't a total shock that Stankoven was continuously passed over. While he was one of the best 17-year-olds in the CHL before his injury-shortened draft year, there's always a buyer beware with players like him. Stankoven is 5-foot-8. "His size was always the question or topic of discussion, but you have to look beyond that," said Joe McDonnell, the Stars' director of amateur scouting.

While the first thing many bring up when discussing Stankoven is his size, it's not something he puts too much thought into. "It'd be nice to be a bit bigger," he said. "But it's the hand I've been dealt, and I make the best of what I have."

If his two post-draft seasons – where he emerged as a game-breaker both in the WHL and at the world juniors – weren't enough, Stankoven's 2023-24 campaign ought to erase the proverbial asterisk that's often stapled to undersized offensive prospects. In his first 28 games with the AHL's Texas Stars, Stankoven had 38 points, which was tied with teammate Mavrik Bourque for the league lead. All but six of his points were primary markers, and his 1.14 primary points per game not only led the league but also put him on pace for the best output of any under-21 AHL skater from the past decade (minimum 20 games), according to AHLtracker.com. He had an 11-game point streak this fall, too.

"I'm surprised, but I'm also not," Nill said. "Once you get to know Logan, his pedigree, how he conducts himself, how he's all business when it comes to hockey, and understand who he is, you're not surprised."

When talking with him and watching him play, you also realize he's the polar opposite of

the soft and one-dimensional type player who fuels the "don't draft the small guy" fire. Sure, Stankoven is scoring points at an unprecedented level, but he's also proven himself as an all-around player. In addition to displaying elite edgework and puck skills that help him create space and hang on to the puck, he's a puck hound who leverages his stick skills and relentless work ethic to win 1-on-1 battles. His small stature is not a deterrent. Quite the contrary. "In the corners, with cutbacks, I have an advantage by being lighter on my feet," Stankoven said. "Having a lower center of gravity benefits me."

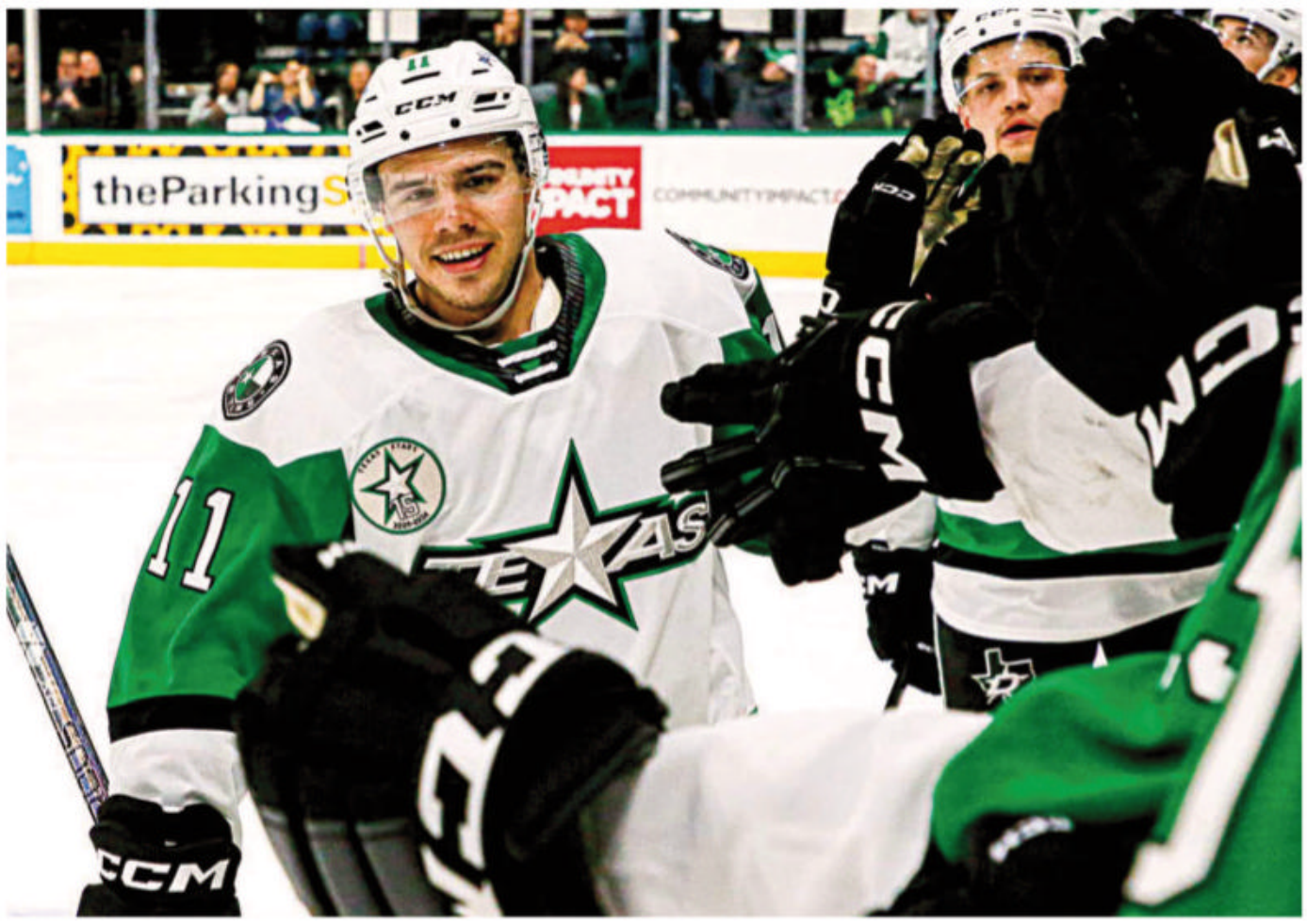
Texas coach Neil Graham says anyone who calls Stankoven too small hasn't watched him enough. "He's always been the size he's been, and he's been able to produce, find offensive ice and outcompete players," Graham said. "It's not a disadvantage unless you allow it to be. I haven't seen him back down in front of the net or in a corner or wall battle. I see a lot of guys that are well over six feet and play a lot smaller than Logan Stankoven."

Graham says that, in addition to how physical and engaged Stankoven is on both sides of the puck, one of his best assets is that he avoids compounding mistakes. That, in large part, is why Stankoven has received deployment as the first-line right winger on one of the AHL's best teams. Stankoven isn't far off from being an NHL regular, and if it weren't for Dallas vying for first in the Central Division (not to mention having some of the NHL's best forward depth), Stankoven would be in the Stars lineup. But barring significant injuries, Stankoven is going to be in the AHL for the entire year. And he's OK with that.

Dallas is known to overripen prospects in the AHL, with Thomas Harley being a prime example. Despite Harley splitting 2021-22 between the AHL (27 games) and NHL (34 games), the Stars opted to have Harley, their 2019 first-round pick, play 2022-23 in the 'A' – where he often looked "too good" for the minor-league level. But their patience has paid dividends this year, with Harley emerging as a solid top-four defenseman. "I always tell the young guys going down, 'The most fun you're ever going to have in pro hockey is playing in the minors,' " Nill said. "The reason is you're playing with guys your age. You all make the same money. You're all living the same experience. You're going to have fun going out together. You're going to go through all those highs and lows together."

Nill believes that once Stankoven gets to the NHL, he'll reflect on this season in the AHL as a pivotal step in his development. Even now, Stankoven can see the forest beyond the trees. As well as he's playing, he's not jittery to fast-track anything. "It's all about gaining that confidence down here," Stankoven said, "and you can't have that mindset of always thinking, 'Hey, I'm playing well. When am I going to get called up?' "

Not every 20-year-old high-end offensive talent thinks that way. "To have that elite work ethic, competitive drive, tenacity, along with high offensive talent, that's rare," Graham said. "It's refreshing to see such low entitlement. He has that blue-collared element to his game that also has white-collar finish." H



> "I SEE A LOT OF GUYS THAT ARE WELL OVER SIX FEET **AND PLAY A LOT SMALLER THAN LOGAN STANKOVEN** – Texas Stars coach Neil Graham

ANDY NIETUPSKI/TEXAS STARS

ECHL

TOLEDO WALLEYE

MAYORAL DUTY

After cups of coffee in the AHL, Brandon Hawkins is forging a legacy with ECHL Toledo. But he hopes to be remembered for more than just his scoring prowess

BY JACOB STOLLER

BRANDON HAWKINS' LOVE of keeping goalies guessing is why he occasionally pulls out his trick shot – and to great effect. "Every once in a while," Hawkins said, "I'll throw a change-up shot."

In these instances, the Toledo Walleye right winger corrals the puck and makes it look like he's about to unload a heavy shot. Instead of following through, Hawkins, a right-handed shooter, will let up midway into his release and freeze goalies by fluttering the puck into the top right corner – all in one deceptive motion. Hawkins likened it to how a baseball pitcher will try to slip a 'moon ball' pitch by a batter.

Sure, it's a silly move, one that probably wouldn't fool NHL stoppers, but it's a testament to the creativity of the ECHL's most prolific scorer. "He can change the angle of his wrist shot release extremely quickly," said Walleye coach Pat Mikesch. "It just pops off his stick, and goalies have no idea when he's going to release it."

Since entering the league in 2019-20, Hawkins has tallied a league-high 132 goals – 34 more than the next-best scorer – while averaging an astonishing 4.6 shots per game in 233 career ECHL contests. In a lot of ways, Hawkins, who led the ECHL with 45 points through his first 31 games in 2023-24, is a minor-league enigma. Given he possesses an NHL-caliber shot and has collected a long list of accolades in the past few years, one may wonder why he's still grinding it out in the 'E.' Hawkins has the answer. "I love every second of it," he said. "Because I just love this place."

Having grown up in Macomb, Mich., a small town an hour-and-a-half north of Toledo, Hawkins frequently attended Walleye games growing up. He described his hometown as a small, close-knit community with a deep passion for its hockey team.

That's precisely the environment he wants to be a part of. But it wasn't always that way. After splitting his NCAA career between Bowling Green and Northeastern, Hawkins inked an AHL deal with the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins for 2019-20. Hawkins, who got into five games with the AHL Penguins on an amateur tryout at the end of '18-19, played in just six more games with the Baby Pens in '19-20, spending most of his rookie pro season with the ECHL's Wheeling Nailers. At that point, he had tunnel vision. He was hyper-focused on getting to the AHL. That's a mindset he now regrets. "When you're worried about going up," he said, "your mind isn't in the place it should be."

And the grass isn't always greener on the other side. Throughout AHL stops with Rochester (10 games), Cleveland (one game), Chicago (six games) and a training-camp stint with Hartford over the past few years, Hawkins learned how demanding the 'suitcase lifestyle' can be. Like when he and his wife had to spend their first Thanksgiving as a married couple apart. The stability of the ECHL was good for Hawkins. As Mikesch put it, "A place like Toledo gave him security and a place where he could settle down and have some roots."

WALLEYE VISION
He was once hyper-focused on moving up a level, but Hawkins now enjoys the stability of the ECHL.

For all the perks Toledo has provided – such as the chance to purchase a place and stay in a spot where his parents can attend every home game – it doesn't begin to compare to the impact Hawkins has had on the community. His coach even says Hawkins' teammates have taken to calling him "the mayor."

Hawkins has prioritized forging connections with youth players. He works part-time at Pillar Fitness, where he coaches kids as young as eight as well as those in their high-school years. "My favorite part about this community is working with the kids and helping grow the hockey community," Hawkins said. "If I'm doing something, say grocery shopping, and a kid points out, 'Oh hey, that's Hawk,' I have no problem sitting there and talking to him for 10 to 15 minutes. It's one of those things where, when I was little, pro guys did that for me, and by all means, I'm going to do it for the next generation."

Mikesch was impressed by Hawkins' dedication to local youth when he arrived in Toledo. "The first story I heard was about Brandon making a connection with a younger fan who was fighting cancer," Mikesch said. "He frequently communicated with the fan and was also part of a fundraiser. He's not doing it for any kind of attention or anything. He's just that type of caring person."

Hawkins, to be sure, wants to be remembered for more than just his goal-scoring ability. "Hockey only goes so far," the 29-year-old said. "At some point, everybody's career ends. If I made a lasting impression, as a person, on the people I've met here or anywhere in my career, then I consider that to be a good career over any accolade that I could ever have." H

SCOTT W. GRAU/TOLEDO WALLEYE

Fink says he isn't afraid to challenge opponents who can be a half-foot taller than him.

PENN STATE NITTANY LIONS

THE HEART OF A LION

He may be small, but Preds seventh-rounder Aiden Fink is showing signs of being a draft steal **BY DILLON COLLINS**

DETERMINED. TENACIOUS. Driven. These are adjectives best used to describe Aiden Fink.

Unassuming at 5-foot-11 and teetering at the 165-pound mark, the 19-year-old Fink is well aware he's not the biggest dog in the yard. In a big man's sport, size is often a factor for the dismissal of players, with speed, skill and guts required to carry the day. Fink has all three in spades, but perhaps his greatest attribute, that irrefutable X-factor, is a burning passion for hockey.

Sitting in his Calgary home during the holiday break from Penn State University, the underrated winger reminisced on his early obsession with the game that has come to define his life.

The middle of three sons of Liane Reid and Derek Fink – himself a collegiate football standout – Aiden caught hold of the hockey bug early. From his first games of mini-sticks to following older brother Kyle rinkside, Aiden has long had his future intrinsically linked to professional hockey. "I was five or six when my brother would play hockey, and I would always go to the rink, watch him and play mini-sticks in the hallway," Fink said. "I didn't know it was possible to love hockey more, but I just grew this big passion for it."

Fink came to prominence with the Alberta Jr. A League's Brooks Bandits, netting 19 goals and 53 points in 60 games in 2021-22 before a breakout campaign the following year with 41 goals and a massive 97 points in just 54 contests, with an additional 13 points in 15 playoff games.

His output caught the attention of scouts for the Nashville Predators, with the host club of the 2023 NHL draft selecting Fink in the seventh round (218th overall), making him the last-ever pick for outgoing GM David Poile. "I was taking summer classes at Penn State," Fink said. "I was getting out of class and saw that my agent called me, and then my dad about three minutes later texted me and said I was just David Poile's last pick, and he sent me the video.

"I'm definitely very honored. And then being able to go to Nashville for development camp was an unbelievable experience. Seeing how that organization is run and being there learning from the best coaches, being able to meet Barry Trotz. Having that experience under my belt has helped me develop confidence on the ice."

Proving his white-hot final season with Brooks was no aberration, Fink has been a sensation for Penn State. As a freshman, he notched nine goals and 23 points in his first 19 games, cementing himself as one of the breakout performers in the Big Ten. "I've been liking my play, honestly," Fink said. "It's a different transition from junior hockey where I played in Brooks. It's faster and more skilled. You have less time to think about what your next play is.

"I've always grown up a hardworking player, always hard on the puck first. I don't know why. It just came with me. I always want to be near the puck. I always want to have the puck in a range where I can grab it. Being first on the puck, it's always been good for me, being tenacious on the puck. I may not be the biggest guy, but I'm not scared to go against the 6-foot-4 or 6-foot-5 guys."

Describing himself as a playmaker who can put the puck in the net, Fink grew up idolizing local hero Jarome Iginla and currently models his game after smaller-stature skaters with top-end skill such as Mitch Marner and Mathew Barzal.

Fink continues to tap into a unique combination of a deeply ingrained desire to keep defying doubters and stake his claim as one of the must-see underrated gems in North American hockey. "I've always been tenacious on the puck," he said. "I'm always determined on and off the ice. And I think that's what's helped me through my life playing hockey. You need to be determined to be a good hockey player. You need to have the right mindset." H

TOP: PHOTO BY PENN STATE ATHLETICS; MIDDLE: MARK STEWART/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

MEDICINE HAT TIGERS

BIG, FAST AND CONFIDENT

'This year, I don't really have a tough player to play against.' Multi-talented and jumbo-sized Cayden Lindstrom is roaring in the WHL as he eyes the 2024 NHL draft **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

THESE DAYS, IT'S COMMON for young athletes to specialize in their preferred sport at an early age.

Medicine Hat Tigers center Cayden Lindstrom took a more old-school approach while growing up in the northeastern B.C. city of Fort St. John. He refers to baseball as his second sport and also played soccer and continues to run track.

When Lindstrom hit the ice for the Delta Hockey Academy's U-17 program in September 2021, his explosive shiftiness reminded his coach, Sumeet Wareh, of a player from a different game. "He was remarkably athletic at 15," Wareh said. "Tremendous amount of speed, skill and strength when I first saw him. It reminded me of a running back playing hockey. He just had that step on everyone, with speed. It's like he's playing football on the ice, the way he moves."

Lindstrom, rated No. 3 among North American skaters in NHL Central Scouting's midseason draft rankings, would be well-suited to the gridiron. The 6-foot-4, 215-pounder, who turns 18 on Feb. 3, was always tall for his age, but it wasn't until his early high-school years he started really filling out. Fully comfortable in his big frame, Lindstrom projects as a classic power forward. He began as a winger, but Wareh started using him in the middle and moved him to center full time in the Canadian Sport School League's 2021-22 U-17 Western Championship playoffs. "He was unbelievable," Wareh said. "Like, 200-foot, back and forth. That's where I thought he felt most comfortable."

The Delta squad dominated, outscoring its opponents 66-13 on the way to the CSSHL championship. Lindstrom tallied 19 points in five games.

When Lindstrom joined Medicine Hat under veteran coach Willie Desjardins, he stayed in the middle. "I can be more free out there," Lindstrom said. "I can go wherever and help out in the D-zone or the O-zone or even the neutral zone."

He sees similarities between his game and that of Dallas Stars pivot Roope Hintz. "We're both quick, good skill, big centermen," he said.

As a WHL rookie last season, Lindstrom put up 42 points in 61 games. His biggest matchup challenges, he said, came against a pair of graduating WHL centers who met him eye to eye – Zack Ostapchuk and Ryan Hofer.

Now, he's in full control. "In my opinion, this year, I don't really have a tough player to play against," he said.

His stats reflect that confidence. Lindstrom had 27 goals and 46 points in his first 32 games before an upper-body injury sidelined him at the Christmas break. Subsequent surgery performed in mid-January will keep Lindstrom out for an additional four to six weeks.

As the founder of Lab 9ine, which works with elite players, Wareh has continued as Lindstrom's skills coach since their time together in Delta. Video analysis is a major component of the program, which builds specialized drills designed to turn weaknesses into strengths.

Lindstrom's dominance down the middle evokes a young Ryan Getzlaf, but Wareh wants him to also be ready if asked to play the wing, banging along the boards or driving the net like the Rangers' Chris Kreider. "There's only four spots for centers," Wareh said. "He's a big guy. I think a lot of teams will put him on the wing to be able to get pucks out of the zone, protect pucks and maybe create more space for the smaller, skilled players on the ice. As a winger, you've got to post up against the defenseman. You've got to take a little bit of contact and hit it to the center. For him, whatever position you play, we're going to be ready to go."

Lindstrom followed up his prep-school title with a gold medal with Team Canada at the 2023 U-18 Hlinka Gretzky Cup in Czechia. In the championship game, he used his speed to get open in the slot, then tipped in his team's first goal, in the opening minute of the second period.

Now in his draft year, he earned an invite to January's CHL/NHL Top Prospects Game, though his mid-January surgery will keep him out of that contest. Even as the hype builds, Lindstrom remains dedicated to working hard and continuing to grow his game. "I haven't seen his attitude slide once," Wareh said. "He just wants to get better as a student of the game." H

TIGER KING
Lindstrom blends size, speed and a powerful presence while ringing up goals and points in Medicine Hat.

RANDY FEERE/MEDICINE HAT TIGERS

OWEN SOUND ATTACK

SOUND LOGIC

The Attack let Carter George spend most of last season playing at the Jr. B level, and that experience allowed him to step into the OHL as a rookie starter this year **BY TONY FERRARI**

THE ROAD TO A starting job for a netminder in major junior can be a winding one. The path is rarely as linear as being drafted, inserted as the backup and then given the opportunity to earn the No. 1 role. Often, the journey goes through small towns, various levels of competition and plenty of ups and downs.

That's been the case for Owen Sound rookie netminder Carter George. Playing primarily at the Jr. B level last season with the St. Marys Lincolns of the GOJHL, George was able to hone his game and craft himself into a netminder who has become the top-rated North American goalie in Central Scouting's mid-term draft rankings. "Playing in the 'GOJ' was great for me last year," George said. "It was my first year playing junior, and it allowed me to adapt to the level a bit quicker than if I was in the OHL, hardly starting, for the full year."

Although he didn't spend much time in the 'O' last year, he was able to get into 10 games spread across the season, with most of them coming toward the end of the campaign. He also dressed as the backup in another nine games, which gave him an up-close look at the speed of the OHL.

The 27 total games he played last year between St. Marys and Owen Sound were the most he had played in a single season in his young career. It was a grind, but the split between the two leagues allowed him to embrace the chaos of the GOJHL while learning how to play within a more structured environment with Owen Sound. "The pace of the game (and) the speed that the guys here in the 'O' attack with is the biggest difference," George said. "Getting used to this level, a step down in Jr. B was what allowed me to step into games at the end of last season and have a bit of success."

The confidence he gained from his success at both the GOJHL and OHL levels last year meant he entered this season not only hoping to win the starting job but expecting it. It was why he was able to step into Hockey Canada's U-18 Hlinka Gretzky Cup camp and earn the backup role with the team.

As soon as the goalie ahead of him – Gabriel D'Aigle – faltered, George was there to take the reins and run with it, backstopping Canada to a gold medal.

When he arrived at camp with Owen Sound, he had three goals in mind: earn the starting job, win 20 games and help the Attack make the playoffs. He's already accomplished one of those goals, and he's well on his way to accomplishing the other two. Becoming the starting netminder for a team in major junior is a difficult challenge, and it's even harder at just 17.

Every one of his goals started to take shape as he stepped foot on the ice for training camp. Early in camp, as George developed a relationship with goalie partner Corbin Votary, he knew he was in the right place to make himself better.

Despite Votary being two years older than George, Votary quickly understood that it was his job to support the young netminder. He wasn't a guy who had dominated the OHL, but he was a player who had been in the circuit for the two years prior, dealing with the grind of the league and the demands of practising against the best junior players in Ontario. "I'm really lucky to have Corbin," George said. "Whenever things go wrong or something needs to be addressed, we're able to go to each other to vent or for advice. It feels good to have that support."

Finding success is often a blend of hard work and being in the right place at the right time. George has done the work on his side of things, and Owen Sound has surrounded him with a team and environment to help him reach his potential. With so much left to unfold in his young career, the OHL rookie is ready for whatever comes next.

GOALIE GOALS

George has already earned the starting gig in Owen Sound. Now, he wants 20 wins and a playoff berth.

TOP: SAM BUSCHBECK/OWEN SOUND ATTACK; MIDDLE: NATALIE SHAVER/OHL IMAGES

HALIFAX MOOSEHEADS

SHORING UP

The QMJHL's arrival on Canada's Atlantic coast 30 years ago permanently changed the landscape of hockey both inside and outside the region **BY WILL MACLAREN**

ONE DAY IN THE summer of 1994, the phone rang at Jody Shelley's family home in Yarmouth, N.S. Shelley was 18, and his long-term goal was to continue both his schooling and his hockey-playing career in the university ranks. In the short term, he was headed to the beach that day.

"Donnie Matheson (the late Boston Bruins and Halifax Mooseheads scout) called to tell me about this new team called the Halifax Mooseheads," Shelley said.

That call was one of several made three decades ago that launched a series of events that would change the hockey landscape forever.

In the spring of 1993, Halifax bid farewell to its latest entry in the AHL. That team was named the Citadels, an homage to the city's centuries-old downtown fortified hill. Although the city, not to mention the region, boasted a rich history of hosting organizations in hockey's highest minor-league circuit, the pro game's state of affairs at that point was running decidedly downhill. The largest city in Atlantic Canada was without a high-level hockey club.

Enter Harold MacKay, a devoted hockey fan and, at the time, a leader in the marketing department at Moosehead Breweries. He saw what the AHL was offering and felt he could do better. "I had lived in Western Canada and watched major-junior hockey," MacKay said. "I started asking why we didn't have it here."

Unable to find a satisfactory answer to that question and backed by the higher-ups at Moosehead – who would assume majority ownership of the franchise – MacKay picked up the phone and called Gilles Courteau, at the time the president of the QMJHL.

The QMJHL in 1994 was a 13-team outfit fully ensconced within the province of its origin. It had also been more than a decade since its last Memorial Cup win – which came in 1981 courtesy of the Cornwall Royals – and carried a reputation as the weak link in the three-league CHL. Franchise moves or

OPENER: PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE QMJHL & HALIFAX MOOSEHEADS

the reception was not positive," Courteau said. "Part of it was distance, but the largest factor was the AHL. They weren't sure we could sell our product in those areas. I felt if we put good owners and a strong team structure in place, it could be successful."

The board had reason to be cautious. On the day the Mooseheads played their first regular-season game, six other cities in Atlantic Canada were home to AHL clubs. The risk, of course, was that teams would be fighting for the attention of the same fans.

MacKay, however, was unconcerned. "I was a big fan of the AHL," he said. "I went to the games and saw why it wasn't working here. It was boring to watch. There was no excitement in the building, and they were drawing less and less fans."

MEET THE MOOSEHEADS
MacKay, far left, and Jodoin, far right, greet original Mooseheads Etienne Drapeau, middle left, and J-S Giguere.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE QMJHL

disbandments were common. The Maritimes were a curiosity from a player, not a team, standpoint. "Some discussions were had with the CHL regarding territorial rights (of players)," Courteau said. "The Maritimes were still open for the three leagues at that time, and I asked (former WHL and CHL president) Ed Chynoweth and (OHL commissioner) David Branch what would happen if we ever decided to expand there. Ed and Dave both said, "If you ever move there, the territory belongs to the 'Q.' When I got the call from Harold MacKay, it was time to get down to business."

It was a piece of business that the commish's cohorts in the QMJHL were hesitant to act upon. "When I first brought the idea to our board of governors,

But make no mistake, MacKay knew the right people needed to be in place on Day 1. One of those pivotal figures was well-known in both AHL and Halifax hockey circles. MacKay again took the phone off the hook (phones still had hooks back then) and contacted former Citadels coach Clement Jodoin. It would prove to be a case of monumental serendipity. "Clem thought Halifax would be a good city for junior hockey," MacKay said. "He was the definite key to all of this."

Not only did the CHL boast a franchise east of Quebec for the first time, but that team now had a coach with NHL experience and ties to Halifax and Quebec. Jodoin understood the effort required to create the team he would inevitably mold. "A lot of credit goes to Gilles

> **"WE WERE ASKED TO BUY BLACK CURTAINS FOR THE ARENA TO MAKE THE BUILDING LOOK SMALLER**
> – Harold MacKay

Courteau for bringing (the QMJHL) to the Maritimes," Jodoin said. "I don't think anyone expected the league to go to a city or a venue like that. Having Harold MacKay and the ownership group involved made a big difference. It takes a real vision to make anything like this work, and that allowed things to fall into place."

In addition to Jodoin, Shelley credits Brant Blackned, the team's first captain, for bringing a group of French and English kids together at a time when some of the adults running the country seemed prepared to tear the nation apart over differences in culture and

language. "The biggest factor in everything working out that first year was our captain, Brant Blackned," Shelley said. "He was from Quebec, but he was also fluent in English. He could communicate with everyone and help lead both groups of players. He also knew what to expect in places like Northern Quebec, where the culture was still more different. If it wasn't for him, our team wouldn't have been as successful as it was and wouldn't have gotten as close as it did."

Jodoin's recipe for unity was rather simple, even if it took the right type of individual to implement. "You've got to have an open mind," Jodoin said.

CLEMENT **JODOIN**

"Both languages are important. A lot of Quebec-born players knew of Halifax but had never seen it. You have to think about the overall (situation), which is beyond language. The same applies for (European) players who make their way over. It's not just provincial or even national. It's global."

That's not to say there wasn't a learning curve for everyone involved – not to mention more than a few doubters. "We were asked to buy black curtains for the (Halifax Metro Center) to make the building look smaller," MacKay said.

The message from the landlords painted a clear picture that they did not expect capacity crowds.

Then there were the road trips, which were an educational experience in and of themselves. "We started going on the road to Quebec, and you really saw some things," Shelley said. "One of our first road games, (Beauport Harfangs coach) Jos Canale threw every stick plus the bench onto the ice. Our first game in Val-d'Or, (the Foreurs) scored the first goal of the game, and the fans threw an actual moose head onto the ice. It stank. There was flies all over it. They had to stop the game to scrape the fur off the ice. It was like 'Welcome to Northern Quebec!' "

Thanks to the work of Shelley and his teammates on the ice, MacKay in the business office and Jodoin behind the bench, hurdles such as blackout curtains and beheaded forest creatures were quickly cleared. By the end of that first season, the Mooseheads were leading the league in attendance, averaging 3,733 fans per game, and further Maritime expansion was underway. The following season saw the addition of the Moncton Alpines who – thanks to shaky ownership and a city that longed for the return of the AHL after the Moncton Hawks ceased operations in 1994 – barely survived a rocky maiden voyage. The Alpines also offered what Courteau feels was the linchpin of maintaining success and stability outside of Quebec. "The first year in Moncton had been very difficult," Courteau said. "Then, Robert Irving approached me about buying the franchise in May 1996. To be honest, that was the biggest thing to ever happen to the 'Q' in the Maritimes. It took someone as solid as Robert Irving to step in and purchase that team to eventually bring teams to Cape Breton, Bathurst, Charlottetown and Saint John."

JODY **SHELLEY**

In their first season under Irving's ownership, the renamed Wildcats led the league in attendance. The Mooseheads finished a close second.

Today, one-third of the 18-team QMJHL hails from the Maritimes. As such, the league changed its official name from the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League to the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League in December 2023. Three of those Maritime teams, the Mooseheads, Saint John Sea Dogs

ONE 'SHELL' OF A STORY

Shelley says he may not have made the pros if not for his time in Halifax. His No. 25 is now retired by the team.

JODOIN: PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE QMJHL; SHELLEY: PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HALIFAX MOOSEHEADS

(twice) and Acadie-Bathurst Titan, have won Memorial Cups. Overall league attendance exploded as the region steadily converted from AHL territory to the domain of major junior. East-Coast-born players such as Brad Richards, Sidney Crosby and Nathan MacKinnon, who in another era could have chosen to bypass the league, instead brought it a new level of respectability. Conversely, Atlantic Canadian cities have been the junior homes to NHL stars MacKinnon, Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand, Marc-Andre Fleury and Jonathan Huberdeau, to name a few. QMJHL teams have won 11 Memorial Cups since 1996, and each one of those triumphs came either from a Maritime-based club or with Maritime-born players on the rosters, many playing crucial roles.

As impactful as the league has been on the Maritimes, the effect on their Quebec forebearers cannot be underestimated. "We'd have owners come down from Quebec to the Maritimes to watch their teams play who were impressed with the rinks

"MARITIME EXPANSION WAS TRULY THE LEAGUE'S BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT, AND IT'S SOMETHING I'M VERY PROUD OF – Former QMJHL commissioner Gilles Courteau

MACKINNON: PHOTO COURTESY OF THE QMJHL; ARENA: PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HALIFAX MOOSEHEADS

MARITIME MAC

The Mooseheads' success helped pave the way for locally born stars such as MacKinnon to stay home as teens.

and atmosphere," Courteau said. "It opened a lot of eyes. They realized they had to step it up and improve the quality of their own buildings. (Maritime expansion) was truly the league's biggest accomplishment, and it's something I'm very proud of."

Three decades later, the architect of the experiment looks back with both realism and pride. "I'd be lying to say I thought it would be such a success," said MacKay with a chuckle. "It's been phenomenal how well it's caught on. People love it. We promoted the hell out of it because we knew it was good."

Jodoin is quick to point out one of the aspects that stuck with him after all this time. "The team's biggest effect was on the community," he said. "When the organization is involved, it leaves an impression. The fans started to identify with the team. Then there's the impact on the kids. They now see (the QMJHL) at a young age. They want to wear the jersey."

And what about one of the first to wear the jersey? After that chance discussion before a day at the beach, Shelley made non-stop waves. His No. 25 hangs in the rafters in Halifax. He carved out a 627-game NHL career and is now a popular broadcaster with the Columbus Blue Jackets, a franchise whose fans revere him as much as his junior club's supporters did. "It's almost indescribable what junior hockey has done for the area," Shelley said. "Not just for the fans and communities but the players as well. I'm not sure where I would've ended up if it wasn't for the Mooseheads. They got me to the pros."

In the end, it wasn't Harold MacKay's curtains that were required. It was a curtain call.

RUTGER McGROARTY

REVENGE IS BEST SERVED GOLD

A rising rivalry between Team USA and Sweden went the American way at the 2024 world juniors, with Rutger McGroarty & Co. making good on a past grievance BY RYAN KENNEDY

WHEN YOU THINK about rivalries at the World Junior Championship, some are pretty obvious: Canada and the U.S. or the Swedes and Finns are naturals. But as we found out in Gothenburg this year, a new blood feud had been lurking under the surface: Team USA versus Sweden.

The Americans beat Sweden for gold, and the game ended with a rare WJC fight between even rarer combatants: all 5-foot-9 and 158 pounds of Lane Hutson (MTL) and 6-foot-4, 172-pound Anton Johansson (DET).

But according to U.S. captain Rutger McGroarty, the Americans had their sights set on Sweden before the tourney even began. "It's something we had in our minds," he said. "It was one game at a time, but I know in the back of our heads, we were ready to play Sweden, and it was probably going to be at the end. Sweet revenge, it feels good."

Revenge for what, you ask? Well, two years ago, the core of both teams met in the gold-medal game of the under-18 World Championship. This is the tournament that USA Hockey's National Team Development Program marks on its calendar every year as the culmination of its U-18 team's season, and gold is always the expectation. But in 2022, a Swedish side led by the likes of Jonathan Lekkerimaki (VAN), Liam Ohgren (MIN) and Noah Ostlund (BUF) – with Hugo Havelid in net – swiped that gold from McGroarty, Hutson, Frank Nazar (CHI) and a bunch of other 2004-born NTDP kids who were part of this year's world-junior squad. Even the younger members of the U.S. WJC team who weren't on that under-18 squad knew the mission. "One-hundred percent, that was the goal," said right winger Gabe Perreault, a 2005 birth year and New York Rangers first-rounder. "Especially for the '04s who got beat at those U-18 worlds. Everyone wanted to do it for them, and we did it, so it's awesome."

The gold medal was made all the more sweet for McGroarty because his tournament was very much in doubt after sustaining a fractured rib and punctured lung against Penn State in mid-November. The Winnipeg Jets first-rounder and University of Michigan sophomore was checked after taking a shot and smashed hard into the boards. He was taken off the ice on a stretcher and spent more than a week in hospital.

Not that the two-way force was going to let that get in the way of his second shot at WJC gold. "It was a lot of ups and downs," McGroarty said. "It was kind of funny because I knew where I was at. Other people were

PHOTOS COURTESY OF USA HOCKEY

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

McGroarty called the raucous WJC final 'the most fun game I've ever played.'

saying I wasn't coming, and I was like, 'That's funny. I think I'm going.' I had so many people by my side, so many people supporting me. It's really cool. But that injury is behind me now. It's part of my history. I threw my first big hit (on Felix Unger Sorum in the final), and that felt good, so hopefully, I can keep it rolling back to Michigan."

McGroarty was a key member of the world-junior squad, too. His nine points in seven games made him one of the team's top scorers, while his perseverance showed why he was a great choice to be captain. "As a leader, he's very engaging and brings people in," said U.S. coach David Carle. "As a player, he can play the power-forward game, and he's great in hard areas. To go through what he went through when you watch that hit that happened to him, and to play as many minutes as he did, he was in a no-contact jersey throughout our whole camp and exhibition, and I just thought he got better and better as the tournament went on. It says a lot about who he is as a person."

Growing up in a hockey family, McGroarty could always look to his dad, Jim McGroarty, for advice. Jim played in the minors and has been in coaching and management for the past two decades – he's currently the GM of the USHL's Muskegon Lumberjacks. Rutger was a phenom in the Detroit suburbs and once put up 82 goals and 160 points in 63 games for the Oakland Jr. Grizzlies under-15 team. He stayed in-state when he joined the NTDP, then kept the trend going by committing to the University of Michigan, where, last year, he spent time on an impressive line with Adam Fantilli and Gavin Brindley (CLB).

Those Wolverines went all the way to the Frozen Four semifinal before losing to an older and more experienced Quinnipiac squad – and no shame there, since the Bobcats went on to beat Minnesota for the national title. Having experience in pressure situations helped McGroarty get into the right mindset for this WJC, after also taking part the year before. "It's just maturity," he said. "Once you play in those big games, Big Ten championship, Frozen Four, world under-18 final, this (gold-medal) game, it's just maturity, knowing how to handle yourself and how to prepare and not getting too amped up for it."

McGroarty's hit on Unger Sorum – which sent the smaller Carolina prospect flying but was totally clean – made him an instant villain with the Swedish fans at the Scandinavium, where the crowd was in full-throat the whole game. Not that it bothered him at all. "That was probably the most fun game I've ever played in my life," he said. "When you hear 'world-junior final,' that's what you think of: a crowd like that going nuts the whole game. It was awesome."

So the Americans got their revenge on the Swedes and did it on Tre Kronor ice, just to rub it in a bit more. Maybe things are "even" now, but it's hard to imagine the Swedes see it that way, especially players who are eligible to return for next year's tournament in Ottawa, where the Americans can bring back as many as 11 players and will once again be a favorite. Chapter closed? Far from it. "Maybe we just opened a new one," McGroarty said. "It's good when you can have those rivalries. It grows the game and gets people into it, so hopefully, we just started something new. So many people are talking about Sweden-USA now. Getting people in the stands and growing the game, that's the biggest part."

And when you end up with a satisfying gold medal, that's nice, too.

ALL QUESTIONS ANSWERED

He may be soft-spoken, but Jonathan Lekkerimaki made a huge statement on the ice by earning MVP honors at the world juniors

BY RYAN KENNEDY

COMING INTO THE 2024 world juniors, the spotlight could not have been more searing on Sweden's top guns. The trio of Jonathan Lekkerimaki (VAN), Noah Ostlund (BUF) and Liam Ohgren (MIN) were all returnees and NHL first-round draft picks, but they needed to step up from their performances the previous year in Halifax. In that tournament, the high-end trio combined for just 10 points in seven games, and the Swedes finished short of a medal, losing to Team USA in the bronze game.

And, of course, there was the little matter of Sweden failing to earn a gold medal in the world juniors since 2012 – a bewildering futility streak for a nation that has produced so many global talents. Luckily, the kids weren't fazed by the chance they had in front of raucous home crowds. "Yeah, we love it," Lekkerimaki said. "We love the fans, and they are amazing. So no pressure, just fun."

There was certainly reason for optimism heading into Gothenburg, too. Not only were they another year older and wiser, but Lekkerimaki, in particular, was on a heater heading into the tourney. Playing for Orebro in the SHL, the gifted right winger was leading all junior-aged players in league scoring, with 16 points through 24 games. Not only that, but he went into the world juniors in a much better head space. "I was more prepared this year," Lekkerimaki said. "Last year, I had an injury (concussion) before the tournament, but this time, I was more prepared."

There had also been a knock that Lekkerimaki was too much of a perimeter player in the past, but he put those fears to bed by lighting up the 2024 WJC with seven goals and 10 points in seven games, earning tournament MVP honors and helping Sweden to the silver medal in the process. That silver was the result of a loss to their newly minted rivals from the U.S., and Lekkerimaki showed his passion by getting into it a bit with the Americans in the post-game handshake line. So, it wasn't the ending Sweden was hoping for, but they came pretty darn close.

No matter how things ended, the Vancouver pick did everything he could to put his team in a position to win. Expectations were high, and Lekkerimaki met them. And he showed off just what makes him special on the ice. "Everyone sees that he has a terrific shot," said defenseman Axel Sandin Pellikka, a Detroit Red Wings prospect. "I got a free apple just by passing it to him. He's not afraid to do things on the ice. He just goes out there and plays his game. He's fearless, and it's fun to see."

Like Ohgren and Ostlund, Lekkerimaki came up in the Djurgarden program, and he played for the organization until this season. He skated in the second-tier Allsvenskan with Djurgarden last year but has now been playing against even better pro competition in the top-tier SHL. The fact he has been producing has made the move even sweeter. "I had a good start," Lekkerimaki said. "I like the team. I like the coach. So, I'll keep going. I have a good role on the team and can perform every day."

His buddies also moved on from Djurgarden to the SHL, with Ostlund heading to Vaxjo and Ohgren hooking up with Farjestad. Now, of course, the pressure will be on Lekkerimaki to keep the party going back in Orebro, where the team is near the bottom of the table.

The future looks as bright as it has ever been for Lekkerimaki, who will undoubtedly get his chance to make a mark over here with the Canucks in the coming years. With Elias Pettersson as one of Vancouver's top players and *another* Elias Pettersson – a physical defenseman who also played at the world juniors with Lekkerimaki – in the pipeline, Vancouver definitely knows how to mine Sweden for talent.

Lekkerimaki tends not to say much when he speaks, but it was impossible to ignore what he did on the ice in Gothenburg. There may have been some doubts about his potential heading into the world juniors, but those have all been undeniably erased now. If you want firepower, the kid is going to give it to you. H

LEFT: CREDIT SWEDISH ICE HOCKEY ASSOCIATION; RIGHT: PHOTO BY OREBRO HOCKEY

SECRET CORE

While their relegation from the top level of the world juniors is a minor fall, Norwegian hockey is set for a major lift thanks to two key players in the summer of 2024 BY RYAN KENNEDY

THE 2024 WORLD JUNIOR Championship ended on a sour note for Norway, as the team was relegated to Div. 1A after a 5-4 overtime loss to Germany. And while the Norwegians ended up as the only winless team in this year's tournament, they weren't getting stomped out every game. They often punched back on offense.

Encouragingly, two of the major contributors to the team's attack were also two of the youngest players: right winger Michael Brandsegg-Nygard and defenseman Stian Solberg. Both are eligible for the 2024 NHL draft.

When you remember that Mats Zuccarello, the best player in Norwegian history, wasn't drafted, it's not hard to forecast that Brandsegg-Nygard and Solberg could represent the best Norwegian draft class ever. Admittedly, it's not a high bar: the most Norwegians ever taken in one draft is three (in both 1990 and 2008), and the highest a player has been taken was 42nd overall, when Dallas tabbed Marius Holtet in 2002.

Thanks to his powerful and dynamic game, Brandsegg-Nygard is poised to become the first Norwegian to be picked in the first round. Solberg, who averaged nearly 26 minutes per game at the world juniors, was given a 'C' ranking by NHL Central Scouting in the fall, slating him for the fourth or fifth round.

FIRST DRAFT
The dynamic Brandsegg-Nygard is set to become the only Norwegian ever picked in Round 1.

The pair have known each other since they were 11 and playing in the Valerenga organization. "It's the biggest team in Norway and the only big team in Oslo," Solberg said. "I've always watched the men's team there and looked up to them, so it's a pleasure to play there now."

Two years ago, Brandsegg-Nygard took his talents to Sweden for better competition, and he's spent most of this season with Mora's pro team. But his dad played for Valerenga, so the club holds special meaning to him. "I loved it," he said. "I always played for Valerenga before I moved to Mora. Friends and family always came to watch, so it was cool to play there."

Solberg also comes from an athletic family. His dad was a downhill skier, while his mom was a runner. But Solberg says thanks to him, they're now a hockey family.

Solberg, a big fan of Moritz Seider and Drew Doughty, likes their combination of physical play and puck-moving skills. It's a style the Norwegian teen has tried to emulate. "He's really good physically, so it's hard to get around him," Brandsegg-Nygard said. "He makes really good reverse hits, and he's a really good passer. He'll fake to one side and go the other way. He's great at that."

Playing on Valerenga's pro team in a full-time capacity this season, Solberg has already talked to NHL scouts about the draft and filled out "a lot" of questionnaires for teams. He also has a bit of a cheat sheet on his squad in fellow blueliner Andrew Nielsen, a former Toronto Maple Leafs prospect who was drafted in the third round in 2015. "I've talked to Andrew a lot," Solberg said. "He's a great guy, and we've become pretty good friends. I've asked him about the draft and the combine, and he's been through everything, so I have a lot to learn from him. We've talked about his journey, and I can take tips from him."

As for Brandsegg-Nygard, he is, simply put, the highest-rated Norwegian prospect ever. He's a first-round talent and could even be taken in the top 15, depending on how things shake out. A big fan of NHL scorers such as David Pastrnak and Alex Ovechkin, the kid has been holding his own with Mora in the Allsvenskan, Sweden's second-tier pro league. He's in the top 10 in scoring among junior-aged players, and he's the youngest in that cohort by almost a year. "He's a fast skater with a great shot," Solberg said. "He's always going to the net and looking for his teammates to make plays with. He shows the way for his teammates to follow, and he's a great player."

And while the pair of friends couldn't help Norway survive the upper echelon of the world juniors, they did get an opportunity to play in the spotlight in Gothenburg. The next time they'll be under such glare will be at the 2024 NHL draft in Las Vegas – and it could be historic for both them and their country.

BRANDSEGG-NYGARD: TONNI PAIBJERG/DANISH ICE HOCKEY UNION

HOCKEY'S UNKNOWN BARRIER BREAKER

Twenty years before Willie O'Ree became the NHL's first Black player, Charlie Booker was on track to make history **BY PAUL BUXTON**

A **HOCKEY MILESTONE** occurred on Jan. 18, 1958, when left winger Willie O'Ree took the ice with the Boston Bruins, becoming the NHL's first Black player. But in a piece of hockey history now largely forgotten, a brilliant young winger named Charlie Booker was poised to crack that barrier with the Bruins some 20 years earlier. Had circumstances been different, Booker could have become not only hockey's first Black player, but the first Black athlete in any major pro sport league, nine years before Jackie Robinson played baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Booker, born in 1914, was a talented player from the Boston suburb of Medford. In the 1930s, he played with amateur teams at every level, from pick-up games on the area's many frozen lakes to New England's inter-state Harvest League. In a 2006 *Boston Globe* interview, Jack Riley, who coached the 1960 gold medal-winning U.S. Olympic team, vividly recalled Booker's amazing skills from when the two played together 70 years earlier. "He was unbelievable," Riley said. "Whenever we met up, I always tried to get him on my team. Of all the guys I played with back then, he was as good as any of them."

According to pioneering sportswriter Mabe 'Doc' Kountze in his 1979 chronicle of Black sports history *50 Sports Years along Memory Lane*: "(Booker) was the first Afro-American to be invited to scrimmage sessions with the Boston Bruins and (their amateur affiliate the Boston) Olympics with American League Olympics star Hago Harrington (then a coach) and the great National League superstar Eddie Shore, both who praised him highly and gave him every encouragement. Even the Bruins team boss, the noted hockey pioneer Art Ross, admired both the talent and determination and the hockey dedication in Booker… In discussing the (reluctance to recruit Black) hockey players, Ross told Booker there was no such problem in Canada. The problem, he said, was here in the States."

In November 1938, the Black newspapers of the national Associated Negro Press exploded with the news: *"Boston – (ANP) – The Boston Bruins received formal application last week from a 23-year-old Negro ice hockey star of Medford, Mass., and the name Charles Booker, a brilliant forward, has been placed on file for future reference for next year's Bruins club aspirants. Not satisfied with this trailblazer of progress, Booker has won a try-out and is undergoing practice sessions with the high-ranking white Boston Olympics club."*

Booker continued to scrimmage on a volunteer basis with the Bruins until, at an unspecified date, Booker told Kountze that "Eddie Shore had personally given (him) a preliminary tryout on some hockey basics and given a nod of approval, such that Art Ross was considering sending the Medford athlete to the Bruins' farm club at Hershey for further seasoning."

Booker seemed on the verge of becoming pro hockey's first Black player until, according to Kountze, "Hitler had other plans. Came the Second World War and Charlie, like so many great American athletes, packed away his hockey gear to serve in the Army. It was never the same after that."

Booker's service in the Army and National Guard effectively ended his chance to play with the Bruins. After his discharge, he joined the Medford Fire Department, becoming the first Black firefighter in the town's history. When Medford built a new firehouse in 1986, it was dedicated to Booker.

Although denied his chance at the NHL, Booker wasn't finished in hockey. In 1951, he enrolled at Northeastern University and, at 37, joined the varsity hockey team, becoming one of the country's first Black collegiate hockey players.

One evening, while listening to a Northeastern game on the radio, Kountze heard the announcer "yelling about the dazzling play of a Black hockey player for the Northeastern team. The Huskies had vital players 'benched' on penalties and this Afro-American player was successfully keeping the puck away from the goal-hungry opposition, and he was doing it in a thrilling manner that had (the announcer) almost falling out of the broadcast booth. (It was) Charlie Booker, the man who had missed his chance at the majors, showing his class as a combination defenseman, winger and center, all at the same time, as he raced around the ice stickhandling, passing and checking" and demonstrating the skill set that must have so excited the Bruins in the 1930s.

Booker died in 1978 at 63, having led a remarkable life filled with challenge, perseverance and service to his country and community. Had he become the NHL's first Black player, he might also have been one of the most renowned Bruins of all-time. H

YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD
Booker enrolled at Northeastern University in 1951 and – at the age of 37 – joined the varsity hockey team.

NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

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JANUARY 3, 2024

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UKRAINIAN HOCKEY DREAM

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THE OTHER SIDE OF BOBBY ORR

Awrey spent a career accumulating plusses – it makes sense he's still doing that in his twilight days in Florida **BY DAVE MONTROSE**

UP IN THE PRESS box at every home game of the ECHL's Florida Everblades, Don Awrey consistently does his job as a volunteer off-ice official. When a goal is scored, he marks who is on the ice at the time, and his work shows up in the game sheet in the plus-minus column. Meanwhile, he chats up the other volunteer officials, which include his wife, Marie.

Boston Bruins fans of a certain vintage remember Awrey as a defenseman who played 10 of his 16 NHL seasons in Beantown. He was known for his aggressive play – earning the nickname 'Elbows' – and backing up Bobby Orr. He won the 1970 and 1972 Stanley Cups, was part of the Montreal Canadiens team that won the 1976 Stanley Cup – but since he didn't play any playoff games that year his name wasn't on the Cup – and played two games for Team Canada against the Soviet Union in the 1972 Summit Series.

Awrey is no self-promoter, even expressing surprise that somebody would be interested enough to interview him in his modest family home in Lehigh Acres, Fla. At the same time, he takes pride in being approachable and willingly grants interview requests when they come. The problem is, it's getting harder for him to remember it all. As Awrey turns 80, he wrestles with the challenge of decline both physically and mentally and wonders how much of it had to do with his career.

"It's one thing about getting older, I'm sure you're aware of it, people lose a bit when they get older," he said. "But Christ, I was in a sport where they were trying to knock their heads off to start with."

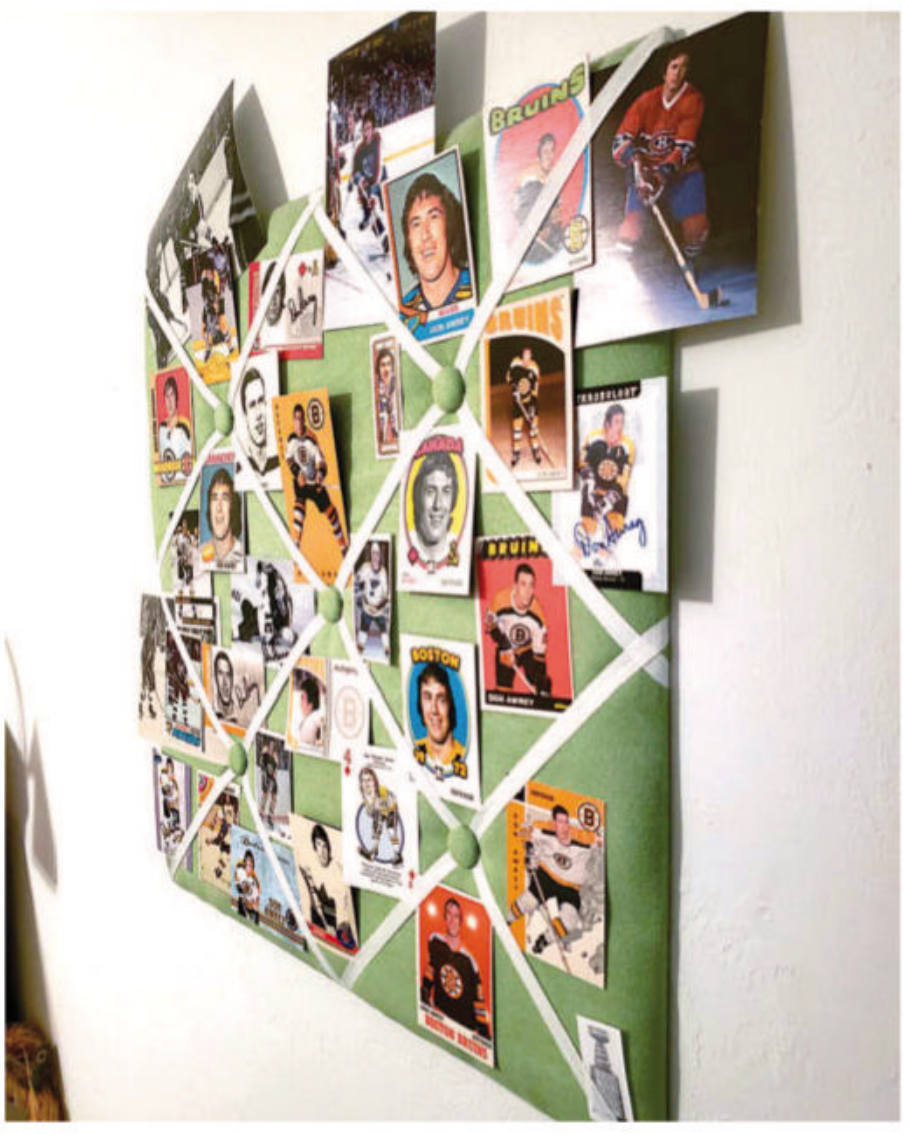
Awrey played in an era when wearing a helmet was the exception rather than the rule. Helmets existed then, but they did not become mandatory until 1979. Given the effects that concussions can have on players who do wear helmets, it's

> WHEN BOBBY TOOK OFF WITH THE PUCK, **I WAS THE GUY WHO STAYED BACK AND WATCHED**
>
> – Don Awrey

DEFENSIVE CONSCIENCE

The steady Awrey was Orr's most frequent blueline partner during Orr's first seven seasons in Boston.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DON AWREY



FOUR TIMES A CHAMPION
Awrey was a member of three Stanley Cup teams, plus Canada's victorious squad at the 1972 Summit Series.

not a stretch to say head collisions certainly had effects on those who didn't wear them.

Though he has not seen a doctor for it and does not plan to, Awrey wonders whether his struggles with memory and focus could be the result of his playing days without a helmet, or if it's the natural course of aging or a combination of both. He does not display other symptoms of cognitive decline, such as disorientation or forgetting family members. He lives independently with Marie and does his stat-keeping work at Everblades games. But he forgets things.

"I don't think I have a lot of problems, but I do have memory problems," Awrey said. "I can go off on tangents. Not good. I have to kind of control myself sometimes. Now, whether that was my personality to start off with, or I can maybe attribute it to getting hit in the head too much, I don't know."

Donald William Awrey was born on July 18, 1943, in Kitchener, Ont. He spent much of his youth playing pond hockey and making his way up through the age groups. He played Jr. A with the Niagara Falls Flyers before being signed by the Bruins at 20. Though he was a good skater, Awrey struggled playing his position early on in his career. Things changed after fellow defenseman and future Edmonton Oilers coach Ted Green took him under his wing and taught him how to be tougher.

From that, 'Elbows' built his reputation as a defensive defenseman. Over 10 years in Boston, he rarely scored – just 21 goals in 543 games, but he was plus-105 on the ice. He was an aggressive, physical player, leading the team in penalty minutes over that span. He was not necessarily one to start a fight, but he had no qualms about jumping into one.

"You had to stand your ground," Awrey said. "You couldn't let people run over you. So, when somebody challenged you, you had to stand up to that kind of thing."

One player he protected, both with his skates and his fists, was Orr. The two were often paired up, and when Orr sped into the offensive zone, Awrey remained at the defensive blueline to prevent opponent breakaways and make sure that the opposing team didn't take too many liberties with the future Hall of Famer.

> THAT WAS THE EPITOME OF HOCKEY. **TO PLAY FOR A STANLEY CUP, ARE YOU KIDDING ME OR WHAT?** – Don Awrey

"Because I was a defensive person and Bobby Orr was offensive, when he took off on his tangent with the puck, I was the guy who stayed back and watched while he did his thing, and I kind of protected him," Awrey said. "People tried to pick on him a bit, so I guess I was there to help along with my teammates."

The high mark of Awrey's career was the three-year stretch from 1969 to 1972. During 1970-71, he set personal bests of plus-41, 21 assists and 25 points. More importantly, the Bruins won the Cup in 1970 and '72.

"That was the epitome of hockey," Awrey said. "And then to play for the National Hockey League and to play for a Stanley Cup, are you kidding me or what? I say this, it's like a dream come true."

Awrey appeared in two games in the Summit Series for Team Canada as well as the 1974 NHL All-Star Game with St. Louis. He played 72 games for the '75-76 Canadiens but none in the playoffs. After stops with the Pittsburgh Penguins, New York Rangers and Colorado Rockies, Awrey retired in 1979. He relocated to southwest Florida, far from his hometown, but his activities have kept him close to his hockey roots. He dabbled in coaching with the Florida Gulf Coast University club team, has played and coached in numerous oldtimers' games and organized charter buses to NHL games.

One thing age has taken from Awrey is the ice itself. He played in some form into his 70s, but now with diabetic neuropathy, he has trouble walking, much less skating. "My skating days are done," Awrey said.

On this point, he is more accepting. Losing the ability to do what defined him professionally for many years is secondary. What he wants to keep more is his ability to remember it. H

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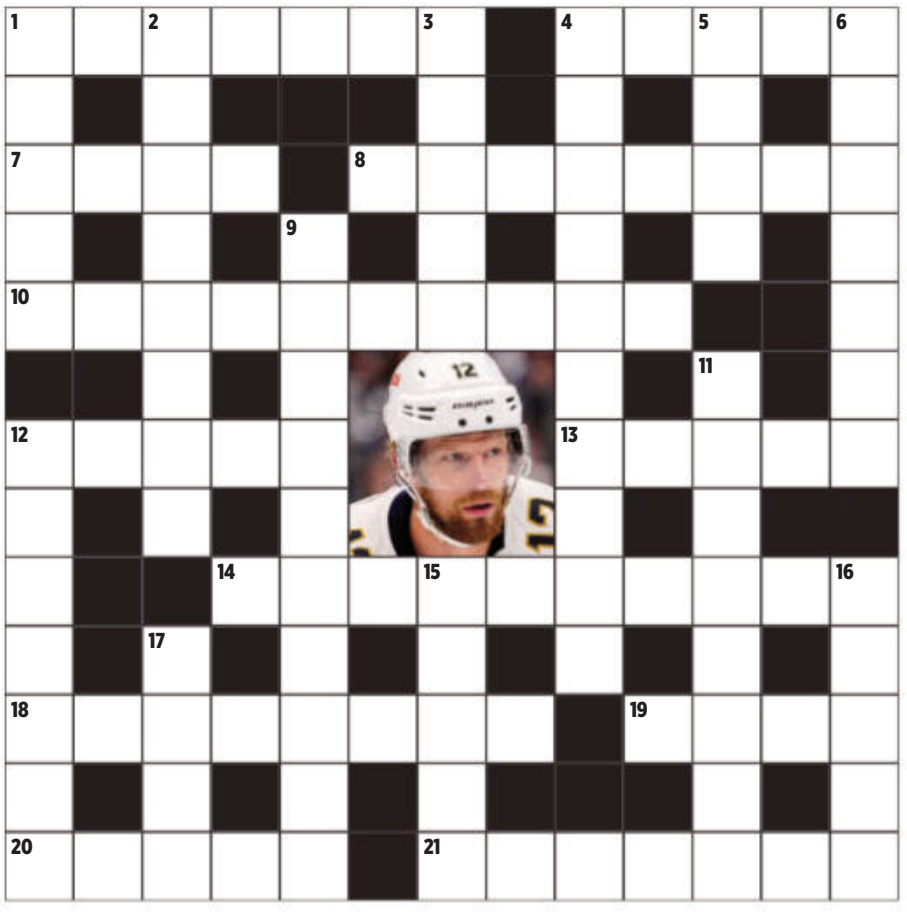
CROSSWORD

BY LARRY HUMBER



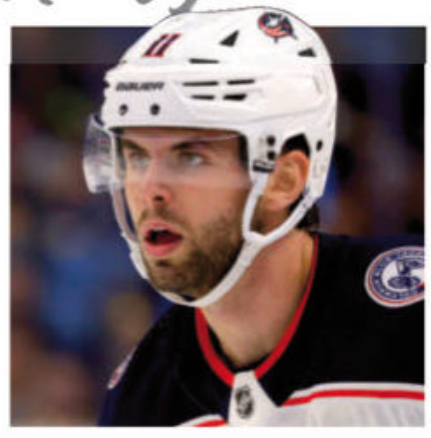
ACROSS

1 He's captain in Ottawa
4 Nickname of Chicago's USHL team
7 Minutes and seconds still to play, ___ remaining
8 Scoring a go-ahead goal, ___ a tie
10 ___ Coliseum, a.k.a. 'The House Gretzky Built'
12 Give up
13 Dave ___ was GM in T.O., is now with Calgary
14 Putting off a game to a later date
18 ___ time is the speed at which a player responds, especially a goalie
19 ___ Bourque played for six NHL teams across parts of 12 NHL seasons
20 David ___ is a *Hockey Night in Canada* host
21 Brian ___ was an Alaskan-born Hobey Baker finalist and later played for the Oilers

DOWN

1 Stick used by 'Gretz'
2 Milwaukee's AHL club goes by this nickname
3 Ex-Penguin Jim Paek hailed from South ___
4 A goalie who has been '___ ___ his head' is likely to be named a star
5 The eldest Staal brother, pictured
6 All-time greats
9 Needlessly flashy player
11 Those with special knowledge of the game, like TSN's Bob McKenzie
12 The University of ___ is Oilers center Derek Ryan's alma mater
15 Blows the whistle (or, bar owner Shor who welcomed celebs and hockey players)
16 Color worn by the Stars and Fighting Irish
17 Mark ___ played parts of five seasons with the Oilers, is now a WHL exec and coach

Hockey TRIVIA



> BEGINNER:
Last season, the player pictured above became the first NCAA freshman since Jack Eichel (2015) to take home the Hobey Baker Award. Who is he?

> INTERMEDIATE:
In 2020-21, this Merrimack College alum led the NWHL in goals and tied for the league lead in points, taking home MVP honors in her rookie season. Who is she?

> EXPERT:
Only two rookies in NHL history have recorded eight points in a single game. They did so in the same contest against Washington in 1981. Who are they?

Word SEARCH

Find the 10 players who brought home rookie-of-the-year honors from 1980 to '89

1980s Calder Winners

M	N	K	H	A	H	T	X	U	E	I	M	E	L	B
T	R	V	I	H	N	X	G	J	E	I	I	H	Y	P
D	D	K	F	M	C	I	E	D	R	T	X	X	M	G
B	Z	B	U	O	E	T	E	R	P	D	G	Q	A	A
T	O	E	D	H	H	L	E	U	H	R	B	M	H	L
V	Y	S	E	W	C	U	L	E	W	H	S	H	P	L
K	T	S	S	K	D	R	S	I	L	E	B	H	F	I
G	X	E	Z	A	D	M	E	T	A	B	N	O	K	B
N	C	P	U	K	R	P	R	W	A	T	X	D	A	F
V	P	I	T	Q	R	R	U	E	A	S	I	V	Y	Q
M	P	Q	A	E	R	M	A	Y	M	H	T	B	S	K
Y	U	M	T	E	Q	U	B	B	R	R	Q	N	O	K
Z	K	U	K	S	D	G	O	Q	R	R	A	K	Y	R
G	S	V	D	R	D	Q	N	B	G	P	B	L	F	G
W	B	Q	P	F	Y	I	S	J	D	A	A	D	M	G

BOURQUE
STASTNY
HAWERCHUK
LARMER
BARRASSO
LEMIEUX
SUTER
ROBITAILLE
NIEUWENDYK
LEETCH

PUCK PUZZLE

Can your hockey brain bring its A-game? The challenge is on!

The Calder Trophy goes annually to the NHL's top rookie. Listed here are seven recent winners. Once you've figured out who they are, the name of the oldest Calder winner – he was 31 – will appear in the red boxes.

	_	K	_	R				
M		_	_	H	_	_	S	
L	_	_	D	_	S		_	G
E	_	B	_		D			
H	_	B	_		_	E	_	U
M	_	C	_	_	_	N		N
K	_	P	_	_	Z	_		

CROSSWORD: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; TRIVIA: TIMOTHY T. LUDWIG-USA TODAY SPORTS

CROSSWORD SOLUTION: ACROSS 1. TKACHUK, 4. STEEL, 7. TIME, 8. BREAKING, 10. NORTHLANDS, 12. ALLOW, 13. NONIS, 14. POSTPONING, 18. REACTION, 19. RENE, 20. AMBER, 21. SWANSON
DOWN 1. TITAN, 2. ADMIRALS, 3. KOREA, 4. STANDING ON, 5. ERIC, 6. LEGENDS, 9. SHOWBOATER, 11. INSIDERS, 12. ALBERTA, 15. TOOTS, 16. GREEN, 17. LAMB **TRIVIA ANSWERS:** ADAM FANTILLI, MIKYLA GRANT-MENTIS, ANTON STASTNY AND PETER STASTNY
PUCK PUZZLE SOLUTION: MAKAR, MATTHEWS, LANDESKOG, EKBLAD, HUBERDEAU, MACKINNON, KAPRIZOV (FINAL ANSWER: MAKAROV)

BCHL

WESTERN HIGH FIVE

With five Alberta squads set to join the BCHL, the Jr. A landscape in Canada continues a monumental shift. What will be the next domino to fall?

YOU DON'T OFTEN GET a tectonic shift in developmental hockey, let alone two in such quick succession. But the January announcement that five of the Alberta Jr. A League's top franchises would be leaving for the B.C. Jr. A League certainly qualifies as a second, and it comes just one season after the BCHL itself went independent from Hockey Canada's national structure.

The two moves are a major change in the power dynamics at that level, as the BCHL and AJHL have long been the elite class of Canada's Jr. A leagues. The fact this new super-sized circuit will operate outside Hockey Canada's purview opens up the issue further and raises the question: what's next?

But let's backfill for a second. The BCHL left the CJHL in 2021 – and Hockey Canada in 2023 – because the Left Coasters weren't happy with recruiting policies. BCHL teams wanted the ability to recruit 16- and 17-year-old players from outside of the province, which is not allowed under Hockey Canada regulations. There is, of course, a bit of a double standard here, in that a WHL team from Saskatchewan or B.C. can draft and have on its roster a player from Manitoba – and a Quebec kid can play for a Nova Scotia team in the QMJHL, for example.

Now, five teams from the AJHL want that same freedom. The Brooks Bandits, Sherwood Park Crusaders, Spruce Grove Saints, Okotoks Oilers and Blackfalds Bulldogs have all agreed to join the BCHL for 2024-25. They will likely all play in the same division to mitigate travel concerns. Getting Brooks, in particular, is a coup for the BCHL. The Bandits were Cale Makar's team before he went to the NCAA and have been a national powerhouse for years. In fact, this now unites what I would deem to be the two best Jr. A programs in Canada (the Penticton Vees being the other).

DUDE, WHERE'S MAKAR?

The Avs' superstar D-man won't be joining his old squad in the new-look BCHL, but Brooks will still bring a lot of clout with it.

players to jump onto Jr. A teams while waiting for their abridged major-junior schedules to begin. Most prominently, Sherwood Park grabbed high-end NHL prospects Dylan Guenther and Matt Savoie.

On the other hand, Olds Grizzlys governor and part-owner Trent Wilhauk told me at the time that his AJHL team would not be recruiting WHLers because he wanted to keep the promises he made to his original Jr. A players.

Both philosophies are entirely understandable. For some franchises, community and good old-fashioned development are priorities, even if holding to that ethos means few future NHL draft picks end up coming through town. For others, however, competition for elite talent is indeed much more global than it used to be.

In 2017, the USHL changed its import rules to entice more players from north of the border into its system, allowing its franchises to roster two Canadians as non-imports to go with the four imports (including players from Europe and elsewhere) already allowed. Since then, Canadian kids who have played in the league include Owen Power, Adam Fantilli and top 2024 draft prospect Mack Celebrini – all of whom played for the powerhouse Chicago Steel.

Both the USHL and Canadian Jr. A leagues have a nice pitch: getting to play high-level hockey while retaining NCAA eligibility. That second part is the most significant difference between them and the CHL.

With a Super BCHL about to make recruiting even more interesting, the other question falls on Hockey Canada: will it bring the BCHL back into the fold? The Canada West squad at the World Jr. A Challenge certainly won't be as competitive – six players from this year's gold-medal squad came from Brooks alone – and the Jr. A championship tournaments won't have the same zing knowing the best teams aren't there.

> THE FACT THIS NEW SUPER-SIZED CIRCUIT WILL OPERATE **OUTSIDE HOCKEY CANADA'S PURVIEW RAISES THE QUESTION: WHAT'S NEXT?**

Of course, I tend to look at these things through the lens of being an NHL prospect watcher. So, I love this new Super BCHL. But let's also take a second to acknowledge that not every Jr. A franchise has to be on this track. Some just want to help players get university scholarships and represent the community. And I love that, too. During the pandemic, for instance, the WHL allowed

It's a lot to digest, and it won't be easy for Hockey Canada to figure everything out, but I know they love ranching in Alberta – and this horse has definitely already left the barn. H

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